SFX

SFX 30 YEARS

STRANGER THINGS
THE ULTIMATE SEASON 5 GUIDE

THE WHEEL OF TIME
ON SET FOR SEASON 3

AS **BUFFY** RETURNS TO TV, WE ASK: ARE THESE...

THE GREATEST SHOWS OF THE SFX ERA!

30 must-see series and where to binge them!

MICKEY 17
BONG JOON HO ON KILLING ROBERT PATTINSON

STAR TREK
DESIGNING SECTION 31

THE ELECTRIC STATE
THE RUSSO BROTHERS DO THE ROBOT

PLUS! DEATH LINE | THE FANTASTIC FOUR | THUNDERCATS | GHOST STORIES
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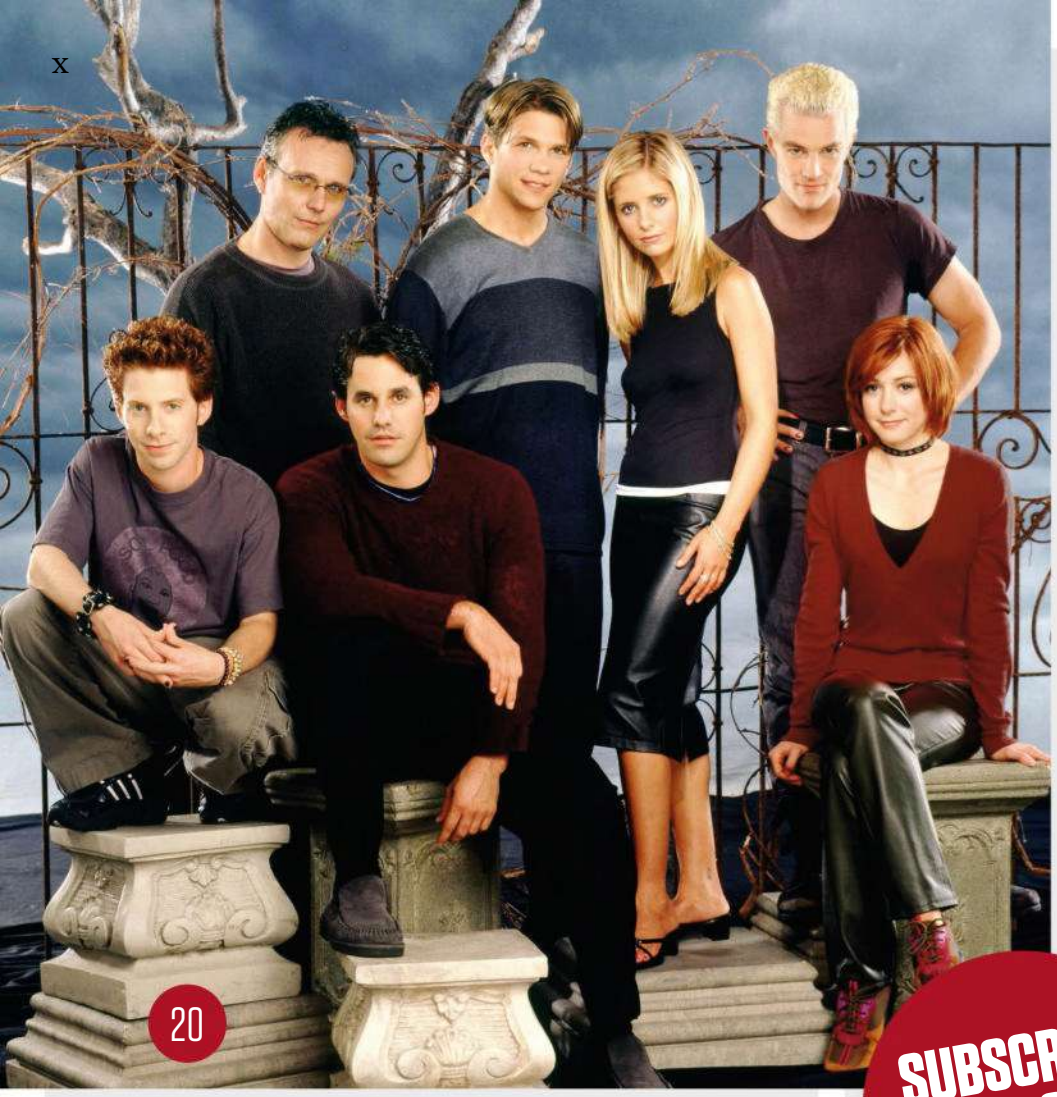

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Captain's Log

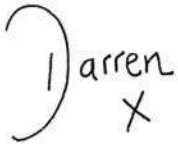
Thirty years ago, genre shows – when they *were* around – were largely American and showing in the UK in strange BBC2 slots, or on Sky TV. Then things slowly started to change. *Star Trek* – which wasn't always as loved when *The Next Generation* first started – became more popular, with spin-offs a-plenty. *Babylon 5* changed the way sci-fi storytelling was done, arguably changing the television landscape too. *Buffy* kicked down doors, as well as vampires. *Doctor Who* came back, twice – and the second time it opened the floodgates for genre television.

But we were always there, featuring the good, the bad and the ugly every step of the way. Yes, long before it became the done thing for mags to describe television shows as "cinematic" and decide they wanted in on the action too...

So we set ourselves – and some of *SFX*'s friends – a challenge to collate the 30 best shows of the last three decades: the shows that we felt played a part in defining the *SFX* era. Hair was torn out (what's left of it), toys were thrown (just not the vintage ones), decisions were made (eventually) and from a list of over 100 television shows – and truly, it could've been much longer – we've picked the ones we think you need to watch, or revisit, and provided a guide on where to find 'em.

But just think – in 30 years from now there'll probably be thousands more; that's how mainstream being a geek has become. Hopefully we'll be around in 2055 to pick our top 60. Only with less hair to pull out.

See you in four weeks!



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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Delighted that a new *Buffy* show is in the works. Before you complain, you still have 144 episodes to rewatch forever (see page 22).

→ Very excited to have been among the first to see footage from *Stranger Things* season five. Absolutely cannot wait.

→ *The Fantastic Four* looks, well... fantastic.

RIP

→ So many legends leaving us – but David Lynch and Gary Fisher (Carrie's beloved dog) hit hard.

→ My beloved *Earth 2* didn't make the cut of 30 shows. Justice for Grendlers!

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Visited the set of new Sky show *Inheritance* (written by *Misfits* actor Karla Crome), and it looks very promising. (And though you wouldn't know it from the initial press release, *very SFX*-y...)

→ A *Buffy* sequel series starring SMG, from the makers of *Poker Face* and *Nomadland*? Yes please!

→ Picked up the excellent soundtrack for Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* at a record fair (£12!), and it's made me wonder why there's no UK Blu-ray. Sort it out, Arrow/Indicator/Radiance! (I am available as a highly paid consultant, by the way.)

RIP

→ David Lynch's death really stang. Once I've finally finished slogging through *The X-Files*, a *Twin Peaks* rewatch is in order.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ As a Simon Stålenhag fan it's very exciting when an adaptation hits our screens. *The Electric State* looks absolutely nuts. Can't wait!

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RIP

→ Absolutely devastated by David Lynch's passing to the White Lodge, especially as it came largely out the blue. But the outpouring of affection for the man and his art following it has been heartening to see.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ Lee and Kirby's *Fantastic Four* is one of my all time favourite runs of comics, so I'm loving the Silver Age stylings in the trailer. Bring on Galactus! Bring on the Kirby Krackle!

→ Check out artist Daryl Joyce's YouTube channel for some evocative reimaginings of such classic *Doctor Who* stories as "The Sea Devils": youtube.com/@daryljoyce1211

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ David Lynch, you changed my perception of art and storytelling. Thank you for every weird and wonderful moment you chose to share with us. (Tips a cup of joe, black, into the void.)

→ Was one of the first to see live-action *How to Train Your Dragon* footage, and now I'm a tad more optimistic.

→ The Zuckerman sisters are showrunning a new *Buffy*? Grabbing my stake and reporting for duty!

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

MARCH 2025

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KITTY LITTER

A new era begins for the ThunderCats – and those who were lost...

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IN THE LOST LANDS

→ Paul WS Anderson brings George RR Martin's short story to the big screen.

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→ Leapin' lizards! Up from the depths and kicking Marvel's collective asses.

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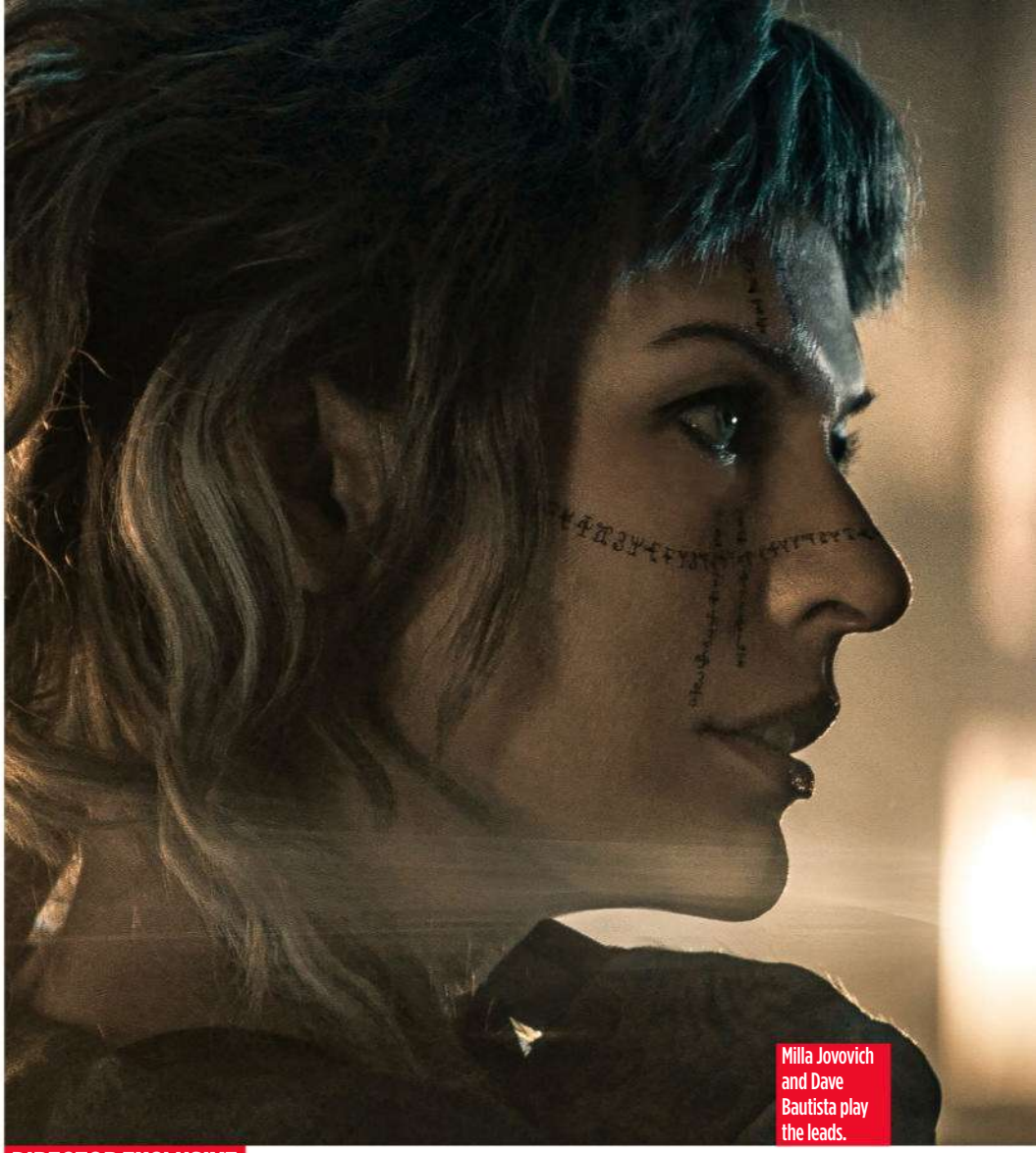
GHOST STORIES

→ Putting the willies up Britain, one theatre at a time, in a brand new tour.



Milla Jovovich and Dave Bautista play the leads.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

The Gray Zone

Paul WS Anderson's **In The Lost Lands** adapts a George RR Martin story into a violent fairy tale WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

TAKE A GANDER AT DIRECTOR Paul WS Anderson's now three decades-long film CV, and literary adaptations remain few and far between. Aside from his 2011 action-centric take on Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*, Anderson has instead bathed in the bloody glory of videogame adaptations, like his *Resident Evil* movies, or in the horror milieu more generally with *Event Horizon*.

But the call of the printed word, specifically the siren song of fantasy novelist George RR Martin's short story "In The Lost Lands" (published in the 1982 anthology *Amazons II*), has wooed Anderson into new territory.

"It's an adult fairy tale with bone-crunching violence and horrific surprises," Anderson tells Red Alert. "Looks-wise, it's very different to anything I've done before. I really wanted to embrace the mythic fairy tale quality of it, so it's an R-rated fairy tale, that's for sure."

A self-professed fan of Martin's *Game Of Thrones* world, Anderson says he was immediately taken by the cinematic feel of the author's post-apocalyptic short story. "The concept was just fabulous," he enthuses. "It has everything audiences like from George's work. There are the dark, interesting characters, and the surprising narrative reverses. This was a chance to broaden out that Martin universe and give [audiences] a taste of something that was both a little familiar but also a little fresh."

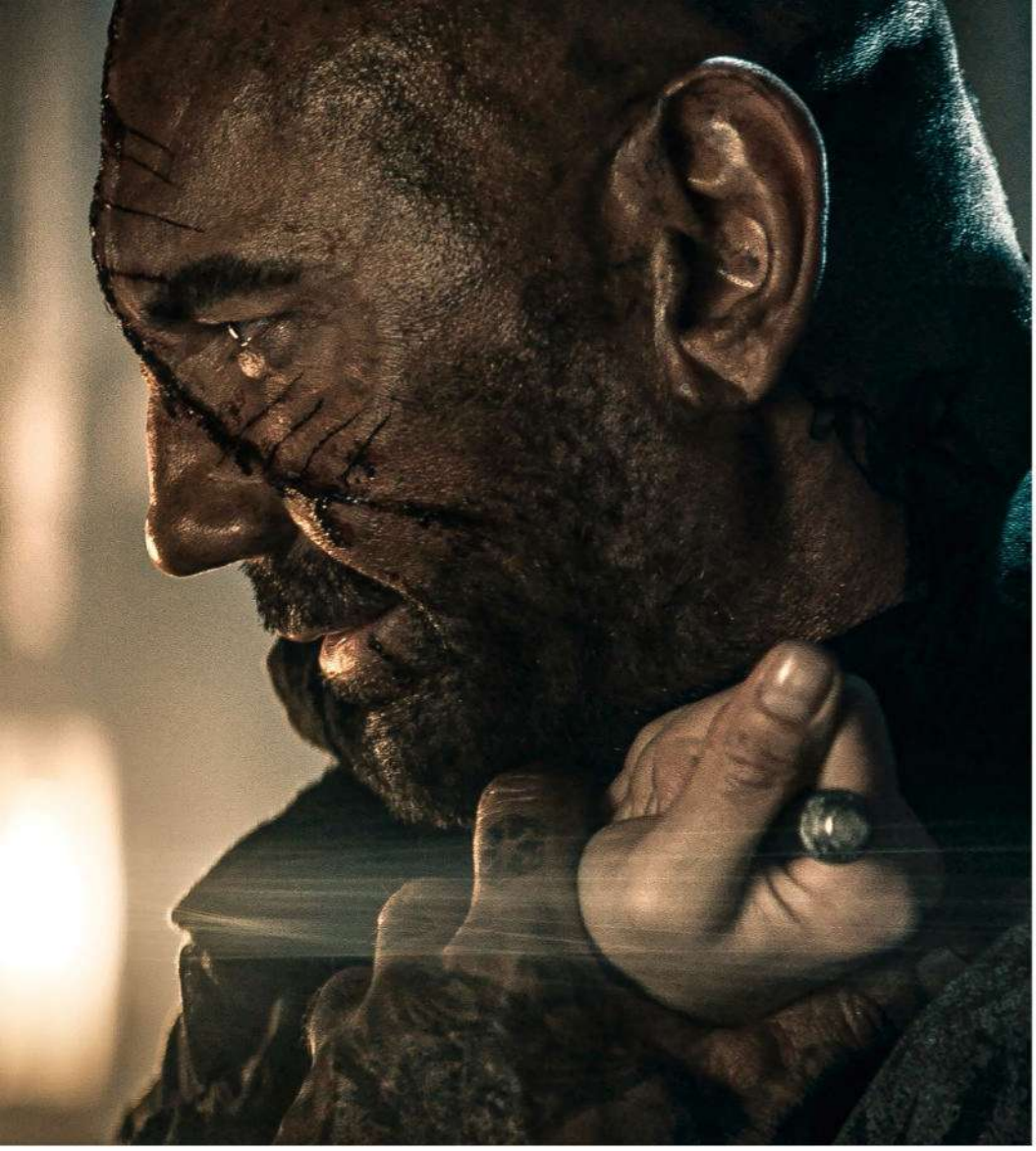
Anderson says the other perk was getting to work with Martin on the expansion of the short story. "We wanted him to be on board with what we were doing to build it out," he says. "So we met, we talked. I showed him a lot of production design artwork. We also gave him a copy of the script, which he'd had a chance to read so we knew he was on board and excited about everything. He gave me some notes that I definitely tried to address."

In The Lost Lands is at its heart a two-hander quest story, which finds the powerful witch Gray Alys (Milla Jovovich) seeking the assistance of Boyce (Dave Bautista), a battle-worn guide, whom she hopes can lead her into the Lost Lands to find a much-needed magical power.

"They don't quite trust one another," Anderson says of the dynamic between the pair. "That to me, alongside [Martin's] Western imagery, those two untrustworthy characters that go on an adventure together but have an attraction to one another, it's very much the tropes that you find in Spaghetti Westerns, which I grew up loving."

Anderson says he secured the buy-in of Jovovich, his muse (and wife of 15 years), by making sure Alys hewed close to Martin's characterisation, especially in relation to Boyce. "Milla hasn't had a really strong foil since the first *Resident Evil* movie, when it was her and Michelle Rodriguez," he explains. "It

"Sorry mate, it's S&M night – no single men."



Two pistols and she *still* can't aim properly.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" "No, I will." "No, I will."

was very important to Milla that that relationship was worked on and delivered, because that's really the heart of George's story: the relationship between Boyce and Alys. While the movie has some big visual effects in it and some big action scenes, she was very, very insistent that she didn't want to lose the throughline of what she felt was really important, which was the relationship between these two characters."

In turn, Anderson says Bautista was "very excited" about the Western elements in the script. "He's like, 'I've always wanted to be in a Western,' so when I talked about the kind of iconography we wanted to use and the kind of framing that I wanted to do, he was very much into that. He's like the action hero with the heart of a poet. I think that comes across in the movie. He gives a very quiet, minimal performance, which I think is very beautiful."

"There are the dark, interesting characters, and surprising narrative reverses"

Excited for audiences to experience something different from his other work, Anderson already has Martin's approval for the final product. He even flew to New Mexico to screen the finished print at the author's personal cinema.

"I have to say, having been in this industry for a little while and made a bunch of movies, it's the most nervous I've ever been having a screening," he chuckles. "I'm sitting there going, 'Shit. This is George RR Martin.'

"But at the end, he loved it. He said he felt that I had captured his voice better than anyone had in an adaptation, which made me feel amazing."

So much so, that he's even encouraged Martin to think about pursuing his planned series of Gray Alys novels. "The movie has a closed end and, I feel, a very satisfying end. But if George wanted to weave more Gray Alys stories, I'd be very excited."

In The Lost Lands is in cinemas from 14 March.

SCI-FACT! ***In The Lost Lands*** **is inspired by the artistic works of Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel and photographer Joel-Peter Witkin.**

SCI-FACT! Out in April are Gerry Duggan and Giuseppe Camuncoli's *Godzilla Vs Hulk*, and *Godzilla Vs Spider-Man* by Joe Kelly and Nick Bradshaw.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Where Monsters Dwell

The King of the Monsters faces off against Marvel's finest, beginning with **Godzilla Vs Fantastic Four** WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE THE KING OF the Monsters celebrated his 70th birthday in 2024, nearly five decades have passed since Marvel released its first *Godzilla* title in 1977, which represented the giant kaiju's first foray into American comics. Now Godzilla is returning to the House of Ideas in a sequence of six one-shots, leading into an epic crossover later this year. Set in different eras, they'll see the God of Destruction coming into conflict with Spider-Man, the Hulk, the X-Men and Thor in the coming months.

But first up is the Fantastic Four in their '60s heyday. "My editor Mark Paniccia was the one who came up with the idea of throwing these characters together. When he contacted me and said, 'Fantastic Four versus Godzilla', I was already sold, and when he added 'Period piece in the 1960s' how could I say no?" laughs writer Ryan North, who is joined by artist John Romita Jr. "It's the perfect time for these characters to meet and they both feel like they're different sides of the same coin. That coin is labelled 'the unexpected consequences of scientific progress', as the Fantastic Four are the positive side with cosmic radiation leading to superpowers, while Godzilla is the negative side with modern weapons testing leading to kaiju moments."

Running for 24 issues from 1977 to 1979, Doug Moench and Herb Trimpe's *Godzilla: King Of The Monsters* was also based in the

Promo art for the issue, by Leinil Francis Yu.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Journey Into Murder Mystery

Marvel's former Sorcerer Supreme and thunder god team up in **Doctor Strange Of Asgard** WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Marvel Universe, although its events occurred around a decade after *Godzilla Vs Fantastic Four*'s '60s milieu. "This story takes place before the classic Marvel *Godzilla* series does in the timeline, so it's its own thing," says North. "Our Godzilla is the one right out of the classic 1954 film, which I rewatched once again before writing a word. Godzilla comes from Tokyo to New York and is not in a good mood!"

As it delves into the past, the 32-pager also doesn't tie in with the First Family's current flagship title, which North also scripts. "It's a period piece, so it's in a sense a little divorced from what's happening in the *Fantastic Four* books I'm writing now," explains North. "But it's been a ton of fun to go back to those early relationships between the Fantastic Four – to who they were when they were just starting out, and Sue was still the Invisible Girl.

"That said, in another sense, they are very similar, as one of the things I've been doing in the monthly *Fantastic Four* book is coming up with surprising but logical ways for the Fantastic Four to use their powers, so there is that too. And there's something I don't want to spoil that comes in very handy when it comes to taking down Godzilla!"

With King Ghidorah teaming up with Galactus to threaten the Earth after becoming the World Eater's latest herald, Godzilla forms an unlikely alliance with the Silver Surfer. North refuses to reveal what other familiar faces might appear. "There are a few, but I don't want to spoil them," he teases. "That said: is King Ghidorah wielding the Power Cosmic not enough?"

Godzilla vs Fantastic Four issue one is out on 19 March.

AFTER BEING TRICKED INTO handing over his Sorcerer Supreme title to Doctor Doom in last year's *Blood Hunt*, Stephen Strange swaps the familiar surrounds of New York's Greenwich Village for the realm of the Norse Gods in his latest series, which teams *Skulduggery Pleasant* author Derek Landy with artist Carlos Magno.

"Strange has none of the support he's been relying on for the last few years and he's lost his mantle, his home, a degree of his power, his magical authority – and even his cloak isn't his any more," Landy tells Red Alert.

"One of my favourite aspects of this whole project has been watching him start off with one simple, emotion-based goal – to reclaim the title of Sorcerer Supreme – and then acknowledge the fact that there are more important things to fix before he gets around to repairing his wounded pride."

Landy refuses to confirm whether we can expect to see any other familiar faces aside from Thor and Loki, such as his partner Clea or his trusty assistant Wong. "There is very little I can say about who Strange gets to interact with because the status quo of a lot of characters have yet to be revealed," explains Landy, who says he's enjoyed writing the god of thunder.

"It's been a source of incredible joy for me, as both Thor and Strange speak in different rhythms to the rest of the Marvel Universe, so it's nice to see them spend some time together."

Charged with exploring Asgard in more detail, Landy is focusing on the more everyday aspects of life in the mythical city. "Stories about Thor tend to revolve around gods and kings and matters of cosmic importance, so there's rarely a chance to just wander through the streets and encounter ordinary Asgardians," he says. "Are they all gods, and do they all have super-strength?"

With Landy revealing that he is introducing "a brand new villain as befits Strange's brand new circumstances", the opening five-issue arc is essentially a murder mystery. "Someone is doing their best to stop Strange from even getting close to becoming the Asgardian Sorcerer Supreme," he teases. "While he's solving the murder, Strange is renting a room over a tavern and he's got a part-time job in an Asgardian clinic, and he's questioning shop owners and bartenders. So this is street-level Asgard."

Adding that "*One World Under Doom* is his entire reason for being in Asgard", Landy says *Doctor Strange Of Asgard* ties in with Marvel's ongoing crossover. "Strange desperately wants that level of power back so he can return to Earth and sort things out," he continues, referring to Strange's role as Sorcerer Supreme.

"But to do that, he needs to first attain that power, which means trusting others to handle Doom until he's ready. It's been hugely exciting to be handed Doctor Strange and then told 'Okay, here is the new status quo he finds himself in, so how does he react to it?'"

Doctor Strange Of Asgard issue one is out on 5 March.

One of the two covers, by Geoffrey Shaw.

SCI-FACT! Created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, Doctor Strange first encountered both Thor and Loki in 1964's *Strange Tales* issue 124.

WRITERS EXCLUSIVE

Ghost Riders

Andy Nyman and Jeremy Dyson tell all about **Ghost Stories**' new UK tour and their latest play, *The Psychic*

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

IT'S 15 YEARS SINCE ANDY NYMAN AND Jeremy Dyson first premiered their play *Ghost Stories* to rave reviews and gangbusters box office. But despite the show's acclaim and popularity – even inspiring a film version in 2017 – it never enjoyed a UK-wide tour. Until now, that is.

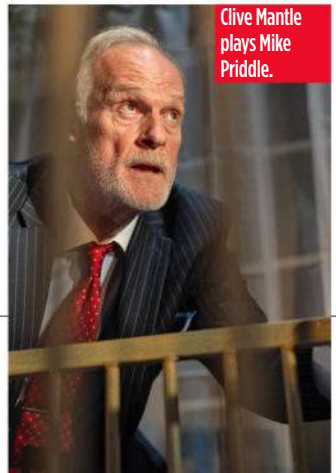
Ghost Stories took to the road on 17 January, and will eventually finish its run at Cardiff's Millennium Centre on 2 August. A decade and a half on from that first production, its writers are clearly stoked that their play has been dusted down once more, and are keen to let us know that, even if you've seen it before, it won't be quite the same experience this time round...

"It's the original production, but Jeremy and I and the creatives constantly strive to find new moments," Nyman tells Red Alert. "There are new things in the sound mix that are amazing and there are new features in the design that make it richer and fuller. So it feels very fresh and exciting, and the cast is superb."

If you've never seen the play or the movie, *Ghost Stories* is a portmanteau tale anchored by the character of Professor Philip Goodman (played here by Dan Tetsell), a paranormal sceptic who's tasked with investigating three tales that his hero, fellow debunker Charles Cameron, cannot find a rational explanation for. It was inspired by Nyman walking past a poster for *The Woman In Black* in the 2000s and thinking "How insane that was the only scary play in town".

Nyman and his co-writer Jeremy Dyson (best known as a member of The League of Gentlemen) have been friends since they were 15, bonding over a love of horror. With both also keen theatre-goers, what they've loved most about the reaction to *Ghost Stories* is that it's affected people new to the theatrical experience.

"It's so rewarding," Nyman enthuses. "On the first night, in front of us was this group of what I would imagine is a community group with these really tough kids, kids that may never have been to the theatre before. We just thought, 'They're going to be on their phones the whole time, they're going to be taking the piss,' and within two minutes, they were hiding, they were screaming! I mean, this fucking thing packs a punch."



Clive Mantle plays Mike Priddle.

Style icons Jeremy Dyson and Andy Nyman.

David Cardy as watchman Tony Matthews.

Professor Goodman (Dan Tetsell) is sceptical.

© HUGO GLENDINNING

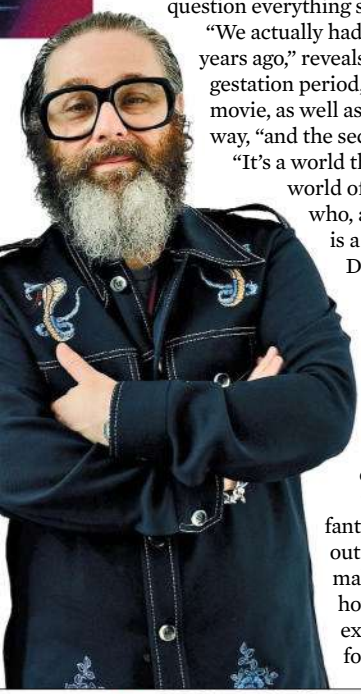
Also sure to pack a punch is the pair's new play, *The Psychic*. Set to premiere next year, it tells the story of a TV clairvoyant who, despite being branded a charlatan after she loses a court case, is contacted by a wealthy couple desperate to make contact with their late daughter. What follows, according to the official synopsis, "makes her question everything she's ever believed."

"We actually had the first half mapped out 10 years ago," reveals Dyson on the play's long gestation period, explaining how the *Ghost Stories* movie, as well as various other projects, got in the way, "and the second half was done in lockdown."

"It's a world that we absolutely adore, the world of showmen," explains Nyman – who, away from his work with Dyson, is a regular collaborator of illusionist Derren Brown.

"But also our inspirations were *Sleuth* and *Deathtrap*, those stage thrillers where you never quite know what's happening. With *The Psychic* there are rug pulls that just keep on giving! Plus, of course, there are some delicious scares.

"And with the leads, it's three fantastic female roles. Having come out of *Ghost Stories* that was entirely male, both in what it's about and how it's presented, it's been really exciting writing these great parts for women."



"There are rug pulls that just keep on giving! Plus, of course, some delicious scares"

At the time of talking, the pair are about to have their first meeting with the show's designer and its magic consultant, but *The Psychic* and the *Ghost Stories* tour aren't the only things on their to do list. Also taking up their time is the small-screen adaptation of their 2023 novel *The Warlock Effect*, a '50s-set thriller about a stage magician who gets recruited as a spy by the British Secret Service.

"Even before publication it got into a bidding war," explains Dyson, "and so we were in a very fortunate position of choosing who to develop it. We've written the first two scripts, and we're doing that with Hartswood Films and the BBC, so it's the *Sherlock* team of Steven Moffat and Sue Vertue."

"It's got all the things that a Dyson/Nyman thing has," adds Andy, "which is for an audience, you think, 'Oh, great, it's that kind of thing,' but then it slips through your fingers, and you think, 'Oh no, it's *that!*' The response to the book has been really touching, people seem to really love it."

So, stage plays, movies, TV, novels... Is there anything left on Andy and Jeremy's creative bucket list? "We just want to do purely work that we love with a passion," smiles Dyson, "and if that happens to take us to film or to the stage or to television, then great, we love them all."

Ghost Stories is currently on tour. For more information, visit ghoststoriesplay.com.

SCI-FACT! **As an actor, Andy Nyman appeared in ITV's 1989 adaptation of Susan Hill's *The Woman In Black*.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- You remind us of the babe... Robert Eggers to write and direct a sequel to 1986's **Labyrinth**.
- Eggers is also turning lycanthropic in medieval horror **Werwulf**, set for Christmas 2026 release.
- Ryan Gosling rumoured to be joining Shawn Levy's **Star Wars** movie.
- Jake Gyllenhaal to star in an untitled supernatural thriller from M Night Shyamalan.
- Elliot Page, Himesh Patel and Jon Bernthal boarding Christopher Nolan's **The Odyssey**.
- Dan Stevens to return as Trapper in the next **Godzilla x Kong** slamdown.
- Harris Dickinson reportedly in the frame for Cyclops in an **X-Men** reboot.
- with Sadie Sink a pick for Jean Grey.
- *The Bourne Ultimatum*'s George Nolfi is the latest screenwriter to take a crack at **Star Wars: New Jedi Order**.
- Matthew Lillard and Scott Foley returning for **Scream 7**.
- *Barbarian*'s Zach Cregger to write and direct the **Resident Evil** reboot.
- Drew Hancock writing **The Faculty** remake.

DANIELE VENTURELLI/GETTY FOR ARMANI BEAUTY

SCI-FACT! **Freed's inspirations for *The Mask Of Fear* included John le Carré's spy thrillers for their mix of tension and bureaucratic detail.**

AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE

Rogue Heroes

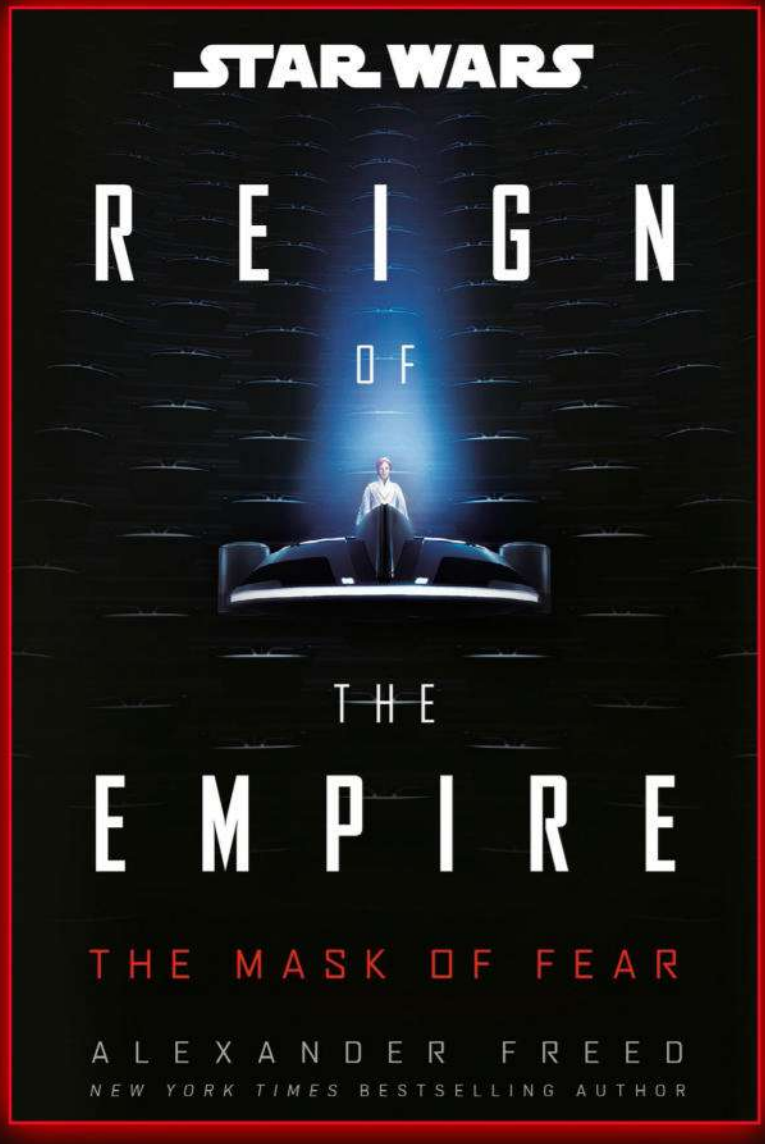
Alexander Freed charts the beginnings of the Empire and the Rebellion in new novel **The Mask Of Fear**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

SET DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF Emperor Palpatine's tyrannical rule, *The Mask Of Fear* – the first in the Reign Of The Empire trilogy – doesn't only focus on the varying impact it had on "important people" such as the Jedi or Darth Vader. Instead, it takes in the viewpoint of "the average citizen", who with the end of the Clone Wars, perhaps isn't having such a bad time.

"Palpatine is promising an end to political corruption," author Alexander Freed tells Red Alert. "Not everyone wants to live in a dictatorship, but things feel more normal than they have in years, and at least battle droids aren't marching through the streets any more. Some people are filled with hope, or at least relief, while others are grieving – for the dead, failed causes or the end of democracy.

"It's a wonderfully complicated period and I wanted to make sure *The Mask Of Fear* really grappled with the contradictions of the era. For politicians, Separatist rebels, people who loved the Jedi or just wanted to make it through the conflict, what's it like to have peace again and what would you do to avoid a return to war? What ideals are worth fighting for, what ones are worth compromising and what sort of person is the first to pick up a gun in a time of crisis?"



Drawing not only on *Revenge Of The Sith* but also *The Bad Batch* "to establish timing" and *Andor* "for character background", the novel centres on Mon Mothma, Saw Gerrera and Bail Organa, although Freed prefers not to reveal how they interact. "They're all on different journeys," he explains. "Mon Mothma is living in a world of shifting senate alliances and legislative responses to the Empire; Bail Organa is one of the very few people aware of Palpatine's status as a Sith Lord, approaching the situation from almost a Jedi mindset; and Saw's guerilla band doesn't know how to stop fighting the last war. Together, they represent three pillars of what will become the Rebellion – but at the time of *The Mask Of Fear* there is no Rebellion, and Mon, Bail and Saw could just as easily end up opponents as allies."

We can also expect to encounter some other familiar faces. "Bail and Mon both have families we spend time with including, of course, the newborn Princess Leia, and there's also a certain powerful Imperial – although probably not the one you're thinking of!" teases Freed, who explores both Coruscant's upper and lower levels.

"They're all still dealing with damage from the war," he continues. "We'll also be taking a tour through Separatist space and a number of new worlds, including a long-dead city-world whose skyscrapers have fossilised through the aeons."

With the next instalment written by Rebecca Roanhorse, the three volumes of Reign Of The Empire all take place many years apart. "They cover the arc of our major characters as the Imperial era progresses," explains Freed. "A Rebellion will rise and the Empire will crack down. People will change sides and reassess old beliefs, all leading to the original film era."

Star Wars: The Mask Of Fear is out now.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

The Dracula File

Bram Stoker's Dracula spreads his wings in new book **Shadows Of The StokerVerse** WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER VENTURING into comics with *Dracula The Return: Cult Of The White Worm*, Dacre Stoker – and co-author Chris McAuley – are continuing his great-granduncle Bram Stoker's blood-soaked legacy with illustrated story book *Shadows Of The StokerVerse*. Lavishly illustrated by *2000 AD* artist Clint Langley, it features 20 short stories, written by McAuley with Dacre's input, that journey way beyond the bounds of Bram's original 1897 novel.

"We're no longer solely looking at Victorian London, as we have stories which even go into the wild reaches of Wales and into the myths of my homeland, Ireland," explains McAuley, who hails from Ballymena, Northern Ireland.

"With regards to Dracula, the StokerVerse keeps the original villain of the story in line with what Bram outlined. We use the sets of notes which Bram Stoker used to expand upon those themes in a way which we believe he would like to have seen."

With McAuley praising his "meticulous research", Dacre also played a vital role. "We consult each other on the narrative, tone and character design of the StokerVerse," says McAuley. "Dacre provides family insight into Bram's mindset, the history of the era and ensures that all of the content of the franchise in the games, comics, audio dramas, novels and this artbook align with Bram Stoker's original intentions."

"We brainstormed ideas together," adds Dacre. "As per usual, I interjected Stoker family insight where we felt appropriate."

It's set around 1896 to 1897, and you can expect to see characters from not only across the wider StokerVerse but historical figures from the late 19th century. "One of the most exciting aspects of the book is that we explore real-world characters that Bram met, and also look at the possible influences on his writing of *Dracula* such as the occult," says McAuley. "So we'll meet not only Dracula but also Van Helsing, Renfield, Frankenstein's creature, werewolves, mummies, the White Worm, Aleister Crowley and Bram Stoker himself."

> **"Dacre provides family insight into Bram's mindset and the history of the era"**

McAuley also hints at an appearance by someone whose identity he refuses to divulge. "I better not spill all the beans right now!" he laughs. "But there's plenty for fans of gothic horror and Dracula to sink their teeth into."

Having previously contributed to the *Official StokerVerse Roleplaying Game* and its various side books, Langley welcomed the opportunity to return to the StokerVerse. "The chance to illustrate more monsters for the Dracula universe was too good to pass up," says Langley, who was given free rein by McAuley and Dacre. "We had no fixed way of creating stories and art. Some stories have been inspired by my art and other art has been created around Chris's stories. It's a perfect way of working."

"I was very impressed by the tone of Clint's work on the *StokerVerse* RPG," adds McAuley. "The core appeal, and it's partly curiosity, is how exactly Clint will illustrate the stories I have written. That's a very exciting aspect of writing for me, how an artist will interpret my words and build a universe with them."

One of Clint Langley's many illustrations.

Shadows Of The StokerVerse is out in March.

SCI-FACT! **"Gibbet Hill", a previously lost 1890 short story by Bram Stoker, was recently published by the Rotunda Foundation.**

SCI-FACT! In the cartoon, Bengali, Pumyra and Lynx-O were left to their doom before being rescued by the Ro-Bear Berbils.

ThunderCats are go! Well, they're Lost, anyway.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Cat Fight

The Thunderians go to war in new Dynamite series **ThunderCats: Lost**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER LAUNCHING DYNAMITE Entertainment's Warner Animation line last year, *ThunderCats* is now spawning a spin-off series. Written by Ed Brisson and drawn by Rapha Lobosco – who previously collaborated on the *ThunderCats: Apex* one-shot, *ThunderCats: Lost* gives a darker tone to the feline warriors' flagship title.

"The challenges here push the team in ways that force them to abandon the moral code the mainline ThunderCats operate under," Brisson tells Red Alert. "The Lost team has a clear goal: establishing a new home for the Thunderians. But their mission comes with some major twists – ones even the team themselves aren't fully aware of. They're carrying a secret cargo – an item critical to ensuring their species' survival. Unfortunately, that cargo slips through their fingers and recovering it becomes a huge part of their journey."

The Lost line-up includes Bengali, Pumyra and Lynx-O – who were all introduced in the original '80s cartoon's second season. "Their origin here varies a little from the cartoon," explains Brisson. "Who they are hasn't changed, but the thrust of their mission has. In the original series, they were Thunderians who were prevented from leaving on the same ship as the ThunderCats.

"In our series, they have a little more agency over their fate but still find themselves abandoned. In *ThunderCats: Lost*, they have a larger, more important role that's tied directly to the survival of all Thunderians, which ties into both *Apex* and the ongoing *ThunderCats* book, but with a bit of a twist that readers will have to tune in to find out about."

Brisson and Lobosco have also created two brand new characters in Neko and Ligon. "We wanted to make sure they felt at home within the larger ThunderCats universe while not feeling derivative of any already existing characters," continues Brisson. "Neko is a snow leopard who is smaller than the rest of the crew but is probably the fiercest

ThunderCat to date. She's a skilled warrior and killing machine with a penchant for trying to solve every problem with violence. Ligon, on the other hand, is a liger – half lion/half tiger – who is the giant on the team. A brutal menace on the battlefield who doesn't need weapons beyond his fists, he's kind and compassionate when not in battle and is the heart of the team."

While he will be familiar to fans of the show, Brisson refuses to reveal the identity of the main villain, who appears later on. But we will meet his deputy, ruthless mercenary Scorpius – another new character – in issue two. "He's one of the most feared and brutal warriors on this planet, who is in charge of hunting down the Lost team and is ready to mow down anyone who dares get in his way," teases Brisson, who's stranding the Lost crew in a war zone.

"It's very different to what the main ThunderCats are used to as it's a place shaped more by technology than magic, which is banned here," he adds. "Its militarised culture is not only unwelcoming to cats but they're dead set on eliminating these new arrivals."

ThunderCats: Lost issue one is out on 5 March.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

League Of Losers

Patton Oswalt and Jordan Blum are opening up their series *Minor Threats* to new creators with **Welcome To Twilight** WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WITH A LIVE-ACTION TV show currently being developed by Netflix, writers Patton Oswalt and Jordan Blum and artist Scott Hepburn are now expanding their Dark Horse Comics series *Minor Threats* with *Welcome To Twilight*, a four-issue anthology which provides guest creators with the opportunity to play in their offbeat superhero universe.

"*Minor Threats* started from our deep love of reading tons of comics, and because we spend so much time in these living, ever-growing worlds, we began to wonder about the little side alleys, slums, suburbs and Skid Rows of the gleaming, A-level superhero worlds, and who lived in the lower depths," explains Oswalt.

"We wanted this world to be as vibrant and alive as everything that lives in the sun. So *Welcome To Twilight* is a chance for other writers and artists to be inspired by the unseen edges of the world we've made."

With Oswalt describing *Minor Threats*' main theme as "How do you live when the glory days are behind you and you've still got decades of life stretching out?", writer Matt Fraction is joined by artist Mike Allred on issue one's tale of washed-up, bird-winged actor Brock Bronkowicz.

"Twilight City felt like a great place to spend a little time because it let me tell a story that wouldn't have fit in anywhere else," says Fraction. "What's it like to look like a superhero in a world full of them, but not actually be able to do anything about it? What would it take for him to finally man up and actually act like one? The story that came out is funny, weird, violent and sexy, and it could only happen in Twilight City."

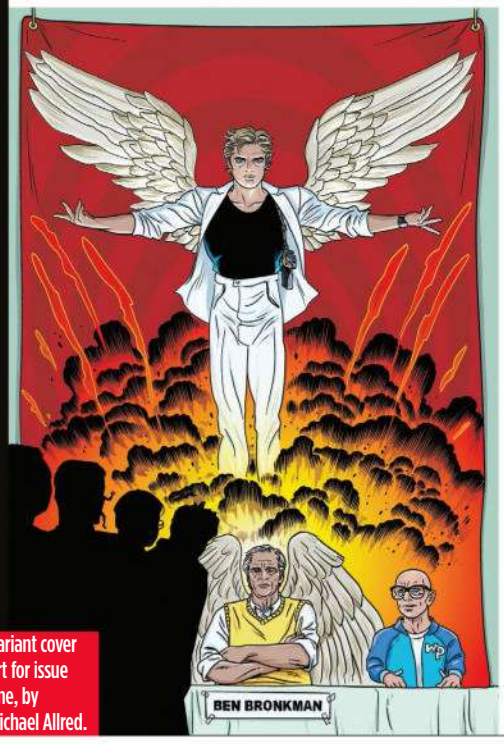
"The *Minor Threats* universe is more in line with our culture than some of the classic ones," continues issue two writer Brian Michael Bendis who, with artist Soo Lee, is introducing a new, highly dangerous figure, who has mysterious past connections that will have serious ramifications for Twilight City's future. "I haven't written superheroes in a few years and I really loved scratching that itch in our own unique way."

"I wanted to be able to diversify the universe with what I know best by including our own version of Chinatown within Twilight," adds Lee.

Gail Simone and Gene Ha chronicle the sad life of failed superhero Crab Louie in issue three, while Gerry Duggan and Mark Torres get dirty with The Cleaner in issue four. "Crab Louie is doing the convention appearance circuit, much to his family's dismay," says Simone. "But he gets a chance for a shining moment."

"His body is a human-shaped pile of crab and lobster parts, which was hard to draw!" adds Ha.

"Our story meets at the intersection of Spandex and crime," says Duggan. "Our hero is a guy that cleans up messes for a living and that's kind of his superpower – he's a mess, as he was bitten by a radioactive mess. We can't wait for you to meet the man who sweeps the problems – and the bodies – under the rug in Twilight City."



Variant cover art for issue one, by Michael Allred.

Minor Threats: Welcome to Twilight issue one is out on 12 March.

SCI-FACT! **While some of *Welcome To Twilight*'s new characters will be spun off into their own series, others are designed as one-offs.**

Doctor Who Worlds Of Wonder exhibition.

Someone now owns Donna's wedding dress...

SFX

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

Audio drama of adventure and exploration
In the year 2025...
BIG FINISH DAY
THE BIG FINISH PODCAST: LIVE
21st June 2025 | QUAD, Derby

◆ Several writers have been announced for season two of *Doctor Who*. Juno Dawson, Inua Ellams, Pete McTighe and Sharma Angel-Walfall join Russell T Davies in the line-up for the next eight episodes.

◆ **Dawson said: "I started watching *Doctor Who* with my grandma when I was 10 years old in the 1990s. From writing fan fiction for an audience of one, to scripting the best TV show of all time is truly a dream come true. I can't wait for fans and newcomers to see the new season."**

◆ Ellams said: "For as long as I can remember television, I've been a *Doctor Who* fan. I started watching when I was 10 in Nigeria. The show invited me to dream, to live beyond my reality. Getting to write for the show felt like touching God; it was blasphemously humbling and exciting, and I can't wait to share my story with the world."

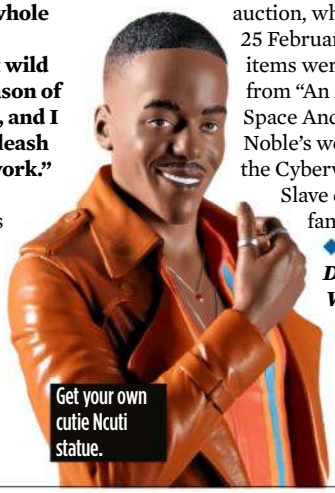
◆ **McTighe said: "The TARDIS is my home away from home, so it's been a joy to step back inside, with Russell at the console and the incredible team at Bad Wolf hanging on for dear life. I love this show with all my heart, and am really proud of what we've been able to achieve with my next episode."**

◆ Angel-Walfall said: "I am buzzing to be a part of such an iconic show! I am a massive Russell T Davies fan, so it is a dream come true to be able to work alongside him, especially on a show that I love. It's a real privilege to be a part of the *Doctor Who* family. I have loved every minute!"

◆ **Showrunner Davies said: "*Doctor Who* takes its talent from a glittering galaxy of names, and these extraordinary writers span the skies. We've got old hands, new stars, voices from theatre, radio and literature, the whole works!**

"It's the most wild and exciting season of *Doctor Who* yet, and I can't wait to unleash their brilliant work."

◆ Retailers have listed new novels featuring the Fifteenth Doctor and Belinda releasing on 29 May. *Fear Death By Water* is written by Emily Cook and *Spectral Scream* by Hannah Fergesen. Audiobook versions will be released on the same day.



Get your own cutie Ncuti statue.

◆ **Tom Baker was awarded an MBE in the New Year's Honours List.**

◆ A hardback version of the Target novelisation of *Dalek* by Robert Shearman will be released on 30 October.

◆ **Master Replicas will release a 1:6 scale statue of Ncuti Gatwa as the Doctor in "The Church On Ruby Road" this July. You can pre-order it at masterreplicas.com for £109.**

◆ Further items were revealed in the PropStore/Children In Need auction, which closed on 25 February. Among the 172 items were a prop TARDIS from "An Adventure In Space And Time", Donna Noble's wedding dress and the Cyberwoman and Pig Slave costumes. That's a fan film, right there.

◆ **Tickets for *Doctor Who Worlds Of Wonder: Where Science Meets Fiction* are available now. The exhibition opens at the Comic-Con Museum in San Diego on 15 March. Visit comic-con.org/museum.**

◆ Big Finish, in association with the Whoovers and Derby QUAD, will host one-day convention Big Finish Day 2025 on 21 June.

This year, the event is themed as The Big Finish Podcast: Live, with Nicholas Briggs and Benji Clifford hosting a mix of chat and audio drama exclusives. Special guests already confirmed to appear include Colin Baker, Peter Purves and Tim Treloar. Visit derbyquad.co.uk for more info.

◆ **Also recently announced by Big Finish are further audio dramas:**

◆ *The Paternoster Gang: Trespassers 4 – Last Stand* sees the team battle an old enemy and meet an old friend, and is released in March.

◆ **A cover has been released for box set *Susan's War: Grandfather Time*, also releasing in March.**

◆ *Torchwood: Inseparable*, starring Tracy-Ann Oberman was released this month, while *Torchwood: Rictus* – which ties into the forthcoming Zygon Century series, is released next month.

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally).

© PHOEBE MACKENZIE WELLINGTONNZ, SARNER

SCI-FACT! Andrew Garfield appeared alongside the Pig Slaves in 2007 episodes "Daleks In Manhattan" and "Evolution Of The Daleks".

DREAMS THAT GLITTER

Once a submission to the Lego Ideas platform, now the Cullens's house from *Twilight* is a 2,001-brick reality. It's the first ever Lego set based on the *Twilight* Saga and we suspect it won't be the last...

It comes with seven minifigures (yes, Edward sparkles) including Jacob as a wolf. Also included is Bella's truck and a tree in order to recreate *those* moments. **Visit lego.com/twilight**

ORLOKFACTORY

The horror must-have that's so popular there's now a waiting list... Heretic's Nosferatu Eau de Macabre is a fragrance they describe as smelling like "an encounter with an apparition in the cold, damp caves of Count Orlok's castle." What you get is a delicious earthy scent: like earth after a thunderstorm...

Visit hereticparfum.com

DOWN AND SAFE

You wait 41 years for another issue of *Blake's 7 Magazine* and then two come along – almost – at once. Issue 25 is a staggering 192 pages and in truth more of a book, this time celebrating the series in home media, particularly the recent Blu-ray collection. As before, the non-profit publication is raising funds for charity, this time two personally chosen by Sally Knyvette: UNICEF and Alzheimer's Society.

You can order now at linktr.ee/culteddge

SCI-FACT! **Published by Marvel UK, *Blake's 7 Magazine* ran for 23 issues from October 1981 to August 1983.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ James Norton to play Ormund Hightower in season three of *Game Of Thrones* spin-off **House Of The Dragon**.

→ *The Blacklist*'s Ulrich Thomsen is cosmic arch-villain Sinestro in DC's **Lanterns**.

→ Netflix's adaptation of Neil Gaiman's **The Sandman** to end with its second season.

→ *Station 19*'s Rigo Sanchez signed for the recurring role of Dragon in the live-action **One Piece**.

→ TV adaptation of videogame **Beyond: Two Souls** in development, produced by original game star Elliot Page.

→ *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan to bring us SF series **Wycaro 339**, targeting a summer release on Apple TV+.

→ Paul Wesley – Kirk in *Strange New Worlds* – to produce a vampire comedy series, written by *Unstable*'s Victor Fresco.

→ Thwip! Thwip! Marvel's animated series **Your Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man** renewed for two more seasons.

→ The third season of **Squid Game** is set to arrive on Netflix 27 June.

JOHN NACION/GETTY

SCI-FACT! David Lynch declined George Lucas's offer to direct ***Return Of The Jedi***: **"I had next door to zero interest."**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

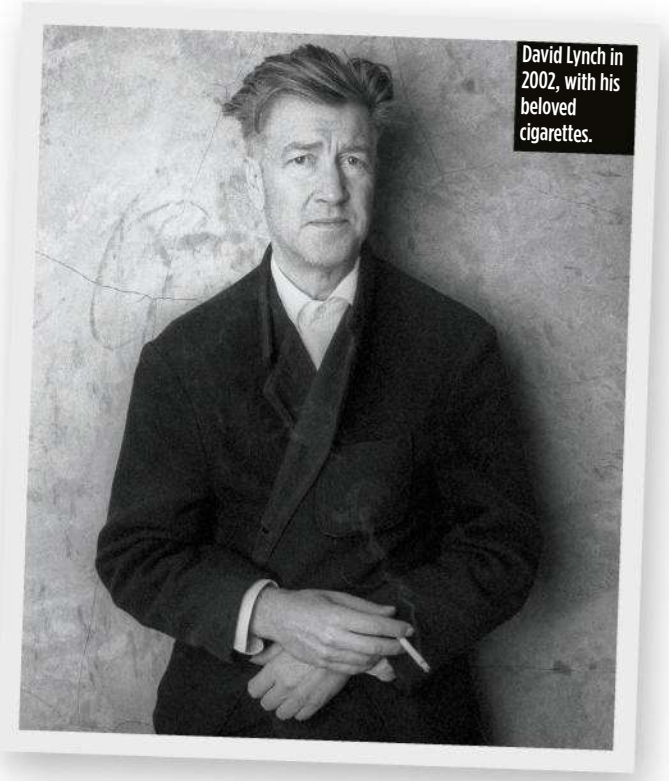
DAVID LYNCH 1946-2025

Remembering a damn fine man

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

ONE OF THE most extraordinary voices of the American screen, David Lynch explored desire and dread, depravity and sweetness. He dissected the underbelly of the everyday in a body of work that remains endlessly open to interpretation while stamped with his singular spirit.

For Lynch, darkness lay at the heart and not the edge of town. It was a truth he had known since childhood: "I learned that just beneath the surface there's another world, and still different worlds as you dig deeper."



David Lynch in 2002, with his beloved cigarettes.

The man Mel Brooks called "Jimmy Stewart from Mars" was born in Missoula, Montana. As a student he made his first experimental short in 1967. Moving to Los Angeles to take a filmmaking course at the AFI Conservatory, Lynch began work on the harrowing, provocative *Eraserhead*, which soon won a cult following.

Recognising a maverick genius, Brooks recruited him to helm 1980's *The Elephant Man*, a true-life story that Lynch brought to the screen with style and empathy. While the film bagged eight Oscar nominations its director proved no easy fit for Hollywood: 1984's *Dune* saw Lynch bruised by the studio blockbuster experience and from that point he pursued his own vision in such deeply idiosyncratic fare as *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Wild At Heart* (1990) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001). 1990's paranormal murder mystery *Twin Peaks* not only defined that vision but proved a game-changer for television itself, anticipating today's world of longform prestige drama.

Big-screen prequel *Fire Walk With Me* followed in 1992 before 2017's *Twin Peaks: The Return* delivered a characteristically uncompromising victory lap.

Lynch made art that captured the tipping point between dream and nightmare. "I don't think people accept the fact that life doesn't make sense," he once observed. Steeped in mystery, unsettling to the last, his work reflected and celebrated that truth.

CHRIS WEEKS/WIREIMAGE/GETTY

JEANNOT SZWARC 1939-2025

French director known for *Jaws 2*, *Supergirl*, *Somewhere In Time* and *Smallville*.

CHRISTOPHER BENJAMIN 1934-2025

British actor who made appearances in *Doctor Who*, *The Avengers* and *The Prisoner*.

NEW AUTHOR

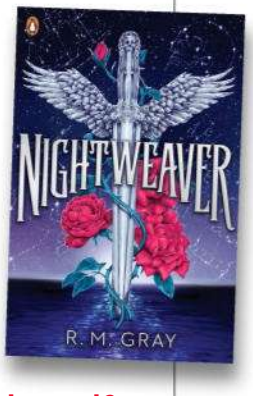
RM GRAY

MEET THE INTERIOR DESIGNER BEHIND PIRATICAL YA FANTASY *NIGHTWEAVER*

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ Aster Oberon isn't your average dagger-wielding pirate-turned-kitchen maid. Fierce, loyal and hell-bent on revenge, Aster joins forces with a Nightweaver – a monster she's spent her whole life hating – to hunt down her brother's killer and gain her freedom.

How does the magic work in this world?
→ It's an elemental magic system, but with the twist of bloodlust and the psychological abilities of vampire legends.

Did anything in particular spark the idea?
→ I have an unhealthy obsession with pirates, and I wanted to explore a world where pirates exist alongside traditional fantasy creatures like unicorns and pixies as well as grim, gruesome monsters that would have given me nightmares as a child.



Did you have to do much research? Find anything interesting?
→ A ton! *Nightweaver* takes place in a fantasy world, but I wanted to include details from recognisable eras of our own history so that the world felt both familiar and new, which led to hours sifting through pirate lore and looking at menus from Victorian dinner parties.

Have you got any advice for *SFX* readers who are budding authors?
→ Write what you love and never give up. If you can do both of those things, even when aunt so-and-so asks you what you're going to do when the "writing thing" doesn't work out, then you're going to go far.

Nightweaver is out on 6 March, published by Penguin.

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THE 30 GREATEST SHOWS OF THE SFX ERA!

To celebrate our 30th anniversary we asked some of the biggest names in sci-fi and fantasy (including writers, directors and producers of your favourite series): what TV show stood out for you in the last three decades? Some of the results may shock you! But they're all subjective and *definitely* alphabetical...

Babylon 5

1993-1998, 110 episodes, six TV movies
Apple TV+, Prime Video
Richard Edwards, former *SFX* Editor

WHEN *BABYLON 5* landed on Channel 4, it was like nothing I'd ever seen before. I loved *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, of course, and *The X-Files* was the show *everyone* talked about. But with its famous five-year plan, overlapping storylines and cast of morally ambiguous characters, J Michael Straczynski's ambitious space opera felt like a genuine game-changer. My dad may have scoffed when teenage me claimed it was "like *Star Trek*, only more realistic" but, three decades later, I stand by it.

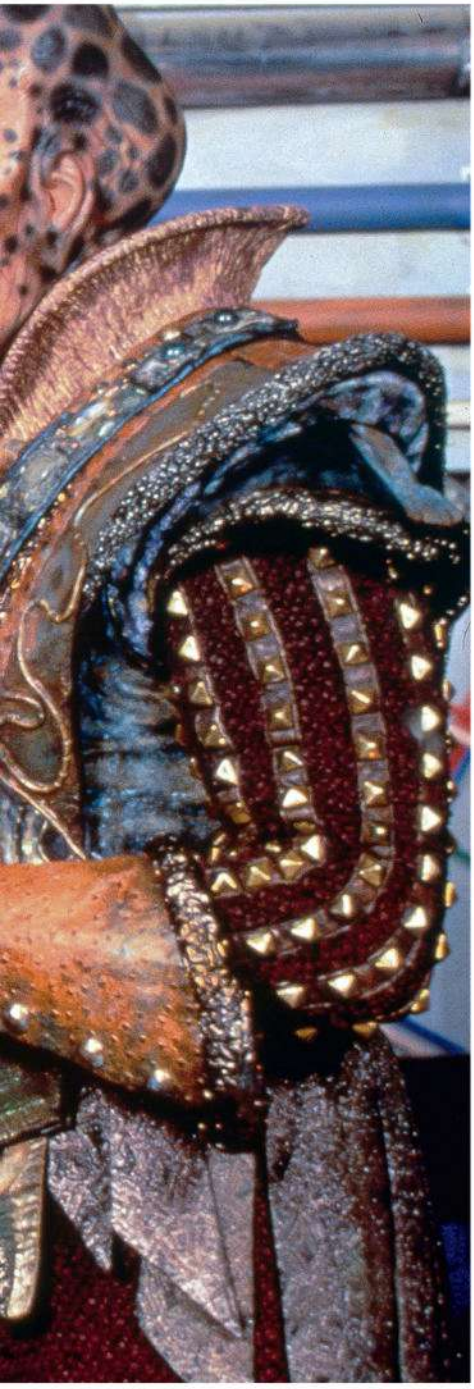
While Jean-Luc Picard and the gang were busy upholding the Prime Directive, pretty much everyone on *Babylon 5* – whether they be human, Minbari, Centauri or Narn – acted in their own self-interest. But despite the mistrust, the backstabbing and a few totalitarian regimes, unlikely friendships were allowed to grow. The evolution of Londo and G'Kar from bitter enemies to cranky, odd couple BFFs is one of TV's great character arcs.

In that regard *Babylon 5* was years ahead of its time. In an era when stories-of-the-week were the TV norm, JMS (who wrote the vast majority of the show's episodes) played the long game. Sure, you got the odd standalone here and there, but mostly this was a giant interstellar soap opera, mixing stories of Martian independence with epic mythology about a pair of feuding ancient races – until they got the hell out of our galaxy, anyway.

Babylon 5 was a series made for streaming long before streaming even existed, doomed to exist at a time when missing a single crucial episode meant you may have missed it forever. With *Babylon 5*, the stakes really did feel that high.

There's no question the show feels dated now. Many of the sets look like they've been lifted from an open-plan office, while modern

WARNER BROS



TVs do the innovative-at-the-time computer-generated visuals few favours – even though many of the spaceship designs were truly out of this world.

But Straczynski's odyssey also shifted the dial on TV sci-fi, transporting convincing drama about flawed humans (and aliens) to outer space, paving the way for the more critically acclaimed likes of *Battlestar Galactica* and *The Expanse*. So I'll have to respectfully disagree with *Spaced*'s Tim Bisley on this one. *Babylon 5* is anything but "a big pile of shit".

Battlestar Galactica

2003-2009, 2012, 76 episodes, two TV movies
ITVX
Stephen Gallagher, screenwriter and novelist

IT'S NOT THE IDEA, IT'S THE execution. I know it had/has its own cult fandom but for me Glen Larson's 1978 predecessor was a big and shiny knock-off of Western movie tropes reskinned as science fiction. The 2003 reboot from writer/producer Ronald D Moore and producer David Eick took the bones of it and fashioned a very different creature, with all of the spectacle and epic grandeur but in support of an intense character-driven drama with a sense of real urgency and danger.

The regular series that followed kept up the standard even when Moore left to work on *Carnivàle*, another show in my top 10 of the era [see page 23]. *Galactica*'s storytelling was complex and adult and Katee Sackhoff, Grace Park, Jamie Bamber and James Callis were each blessed and cursed with a career-defining role with which this viewer will forever associate them.

After a couple of seasons the show began to falter with less of the sense of a story unfolding, more of a casting around for ideas to keep it going. But when it was good, it was great. That's enough.

NBC UNIVERSAL

Being Human

2008-2013, 37 episodes
BBC iPlayer, ITVX
Dave Golder, former *SFX* Editor

I HEARD THE ONE ABOUT the vampire, the ghost and the werewolf who shared a house? It sounds like the first line of a joke, and indeed BBC Three's supernatural comedy drama could be very funny at times, as its evolving roster of central supernatural housemates (starting with Mitchell, Annie and George; ending with Hal, Alex and Tom) tried to lead normal lives in Bristol and later Barry Island.

But it could also be very, very dark as the characters fought with the darker sides of their nature as well as a series of unnervingly blue collar baddies, culminating with the Devil in the guise of a foul-mouthed pensioner in a tatty seaside hotel.

It also boasted a brilliant final episode, featuring a coda that was either one of the most uplifting or bleakest endings ever.

BBC

The crew of the USS Callister in *Black Mirror*.

NETFLIX

Black Mirror

2011-present, 27 episodes, one interactive special

Netflix

LaToya Morgan, Showrunner/Co-Creator, *Duster* (HBO Max)

TWENTY-SEVEN episodes of pure science fiction goodness is why *Black Mirror* is one of the most powerful television series of the last 15 years. I remember where I was when I watched the compellingly horrifying dilemma at the heart of the first episode "The National Anthem." I couldn't believe the plot as it unfolded, but more importantly, I couldn't shake the feeling that if what happened in the episode happened in real life, I wasn't sure if I wouldn't watch the insanity being broadcast along with the rest of the world.

It stopped me cold and made me think. Hell, it made me cringe – in the best possible way. And Charlie Brooker, in his diabolical brilliance, has not taken his foot off the gas since. Each season's technological advances and stakes become even more poignant and terrifying than the last.

But let's be real – *The Twilight Zone* is one of my all time favorite shows and *Black Mirror* owes a lot to its anthological predecessor. But *Black Mirror* sets itself apart by taking us through the looking glass to a dark future not-so-distant from our own. It explores the allure, power – and in most cases – the destructive nature of technology run amok. Within each episode is a morality play stretched to its limits, forcing its characters, and by extension the viewing audience, to go deep into the darkest corners of human nature. And just like when staring into a mirror, we get a glimpse of our true selves.

The writing is exceptional. The filmmaking is outstanding. Production design is impeccable. Every season's cast manages to make each episode their own. Some of my all time favourite episodes of television are packed into those six seasons. The most gorgeous, unexpected love story in "San Junipero". The darkest *Star Trek* homage in the history of television in "USS Callister". An epic choose your own adventure story in "Bandersnatch". A bleak mechanical future shot in glorious black and white in "Metalhead". And the darkest and most poignant trifecta of endings in "White Bear", "Beyond the Sea" and "White Christmas".

Rod Serling would be proud. I've never been more jealous or more inspired by a show. Maybe heaven is indeed a place on Earth... where one gets lost in the dark tales flickering on one of our technological devices.

Buffy The Vampire Slayer

1997-2003, 144 episodes

Disney+, Paramount+

Juno Dawson, screenwriter and novelist

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP IN THE '80S, TOO often female characters were sidekicks or love interests. As a child, I watched Willie Scott scream at insects in *Temple Of Doom* or Andy from *The Goonies* hang off Josh Brolin. But horror, paradoxically, felt like a safer space for women; Laurie Strode or Sidney Prescott could overcome their male oppressors.

It was into this climate that Buffy Ann Summers back-flipped onto the scene in 1992's *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. A tonally confused movie, but nine-year-old me was entirely sold on a monster-killing valley-girl cheerleader. It was unlike anything else I had ever seen. The DNA of what would become the defining TV series is there: the legacy and responsibility of the slayer; the quickfire dialogue; the female strength.

I'm not going to detail here the much-discussed misconduct on the set of *Buffy* or *Angel*. It's heart-breaking to me that women were made to suffer on a show I love so much. I have to work to reconcile these two truths. Even with the legacy tarnished, the stories themselves remain something the cast can be proud of. The influence on genre television is undeniable.

Buffy – and the vast majority of the scripts hold up 25 years on – felt crisp and modern. While the actors *may* have been pushing 30, Sunnydale High felt as real as my West Yorkshire comprehensive. The "monsters" Buffy and her friends faced were often allegorical for the real trauma of growing up: a neglected teenage girl turns invisible; a mild-mannered boyfriend possesses a jealous streak that turns him into a beast and, perhaps most famously, Buffy shags a guy one time and he becomes a whole different person.

This intelligent, layered storytelling set *Buffy* apart from even its best counterparts. *Charmed* was a passable soap, and *Roswell* had a fun set-up, but they didn't have the depth of *Buffy*. The monster-of-the-week format with a greater story arc setting up a yearly Big Bad has been as influential as the characters themselves. Every season offered a soft reset so new fans could return or join, thus avoiding the head-scratching fatigue of something like *The X-Files*. This approach has been adopted widely, most notably in the 2005 reboot of *Doctor Who*, which reused the formula to great success.

But I wonder if *Buffy*'s greatest feat remains the centring of female characters. Without the cult success of *Buffy*, we may not have had – deep breath – *Alias*, *Dark Angel*, *Tru Calling*, *Ghost Whisperer*, *Dollhouse*, *Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood* or *Chilling Adventures Of Sabrina*. *Buffy* proved that there was an appetite for girls with agency. I don't love Buffy because she's "whip-smart" or "kickass", I love her because she's flawed, occasionally sullen, sometimes selfish, and suffers real Main Character Syndrome.

As Buffy turns 30, I don't think she's been bettered. I remain torn on whether I want to see Sarah Michelle Gellar pick up her stake again.

Buffy and chums. Hey, there's a spin-off name...

FOX

Carnivàle

2003-2005, 24 episodes

NOW

Stephen Volk, screenwriter and novelist

I LOVE THAT DANIEL Knauf dreamt up my favourite show of recent times 15 years before it was finally made, pissed off with his job as a health insurance broker. *Carnivàle* was his dustbowl tornado of a concept, born of a lifelong fascination with travelling sideshows, and the experience of growing up with a disabled father considered by some to be a "freak".

From this uninspiring but inspired germ Knauf initially penned a mammoth, unmakeable 180-page screenplay that uniquely showcased the odd, the raw, the desperate and the supernatural while exploring the vast, warring enigmas of good and evil.

Thank God and the Devil for HBO, who said that his wild vision for a movie was actually a TV show all along. To me, it's a horror-fantasy epic of Biblical proportions, as if Ray Bradbury and Cecil B de Mille were sat in the writers' room.

Add to that heady mix a barnstorming Burt Lancaster part for Clancy Brown as deranged Brother Justin, and Nick Stahl as the faux-Christ innocent who runs away to join the circus. What a circus it is: miracles and magic springing from the dry desperation of the Depression. And in "Babylon", one of the most chilling episodes of television ever made.

Jeff Beal's score for *Carnivàle* never fails to thrill me, and I have the soundtrack on CD. It's inspiring as the best of anything always is. The intended trilogy of "books" (two seasons each) never transpired: at $4m an ep, even HBO shuddered. Possibly my favourite genre concoction in any medium and one of the real wonders of the Golden Era of TV, cancellation does not dim its brilliance one iota.

PHOTO 12 / ALAMY

Doctor Who

2005-present
BBC iPlayer
Soo Hugh, Showrunner/writer/EP, (*Pachinko*, *The Terror*)

DOCTOR WHO? FEATURING the oldest question in the television universe, there's no other show quite like it. With 40 seasons under its belt and an impressive roster of 15 Doctors, I will brazenly attest that *Doctor Who* is the most underrated show ever in television history. Truly.

Name another show that has churned out as many brilliant episodes across this many genres ranging from the horror masterpiece of "Blink" to the unforgettable uncanniness of "The Empty Child" to the sweeping romance of "The Girl In The Fireplace" and so on. Not to mention all the cultural touchstones that have become certifiable icons – Weeping Angels! The TARDIS! Daleks! The Sonic Screwdriver!

And while too many shows rest on tired laurels, *Doctor Who* isn't afraid to self-detonate, constantly challenging itself to reinvent the television wheel, even if this means taking a stumble. Sure, not all episodes are great, but the ones that are – and there are a slew of them – transcend the medium, stretching the bounds of convention, genre and form. And while featuring a murderers' row of lead and guest cast that includes David Tennant, Matt Smith, Carey Mulligan, Daniel Kaluuya, Simon Pegg and Bill Nighy, the show is a masterclass on what happens when you allow amazing actors to let loose and have fun while trying to save the universe.

I have had so many feels while watching this show. I've laughed and I've cried and I've thrown things at the TV and watched with eyes half closed and have even puked once (though I might've had the flu). But most importantly, I've been awed. That most wondrous of feelings where you're left watching the end credits and asking yourself how in hell they just did that.

Billie Piper and David Tennant: cool for cats.

BBC

Farscape

1999-2003, 88 episodes
ITVX, Prime Video
Chris Chibnall, Showrunner/writer/EP (*Doctor Who*)

I DIDN'T DISCOVER IT UNTIL THE EARLY 2000S, VIA DVD box sets. It takes the standard "bunch of strangers thrown together on a spaceship" set-up and juices it for strangeness and brilliance, becoming richer and deeper and stranger as the seasons progress. Kind of like an Aussie-American *Blake's 7* on 'shrooms; with added puppeteering, and writing that (once it really finds its voice towards the final third of the first season) keeps wrongfooting and surprising you. It's funny and dark and daft and occasionally hallucinogenic, has great characterisation and performances, lovely production design and a terrific series villain.

HALLMARK ENTERTAINMENT

"Chris Chibnall simply loves my work, you know."

The *Fringe* folks: ironically, only one on show.

Fringe

2008-2013, 100 episodes
ITVX
Tara Bennett, *SFX* US Editor

GREAT TELEVISION SHOWS HAVE always needed time to cook. That was especially the case with sci-fi shows that needed to figure out their grooves, including the JJ Abrams executive-produced *Fringe*. The series premiered in 2008 on Fox – already a scary prospect for the notoriously genre-twitchy network – and was received by critics and audiences with curious uncertainty.

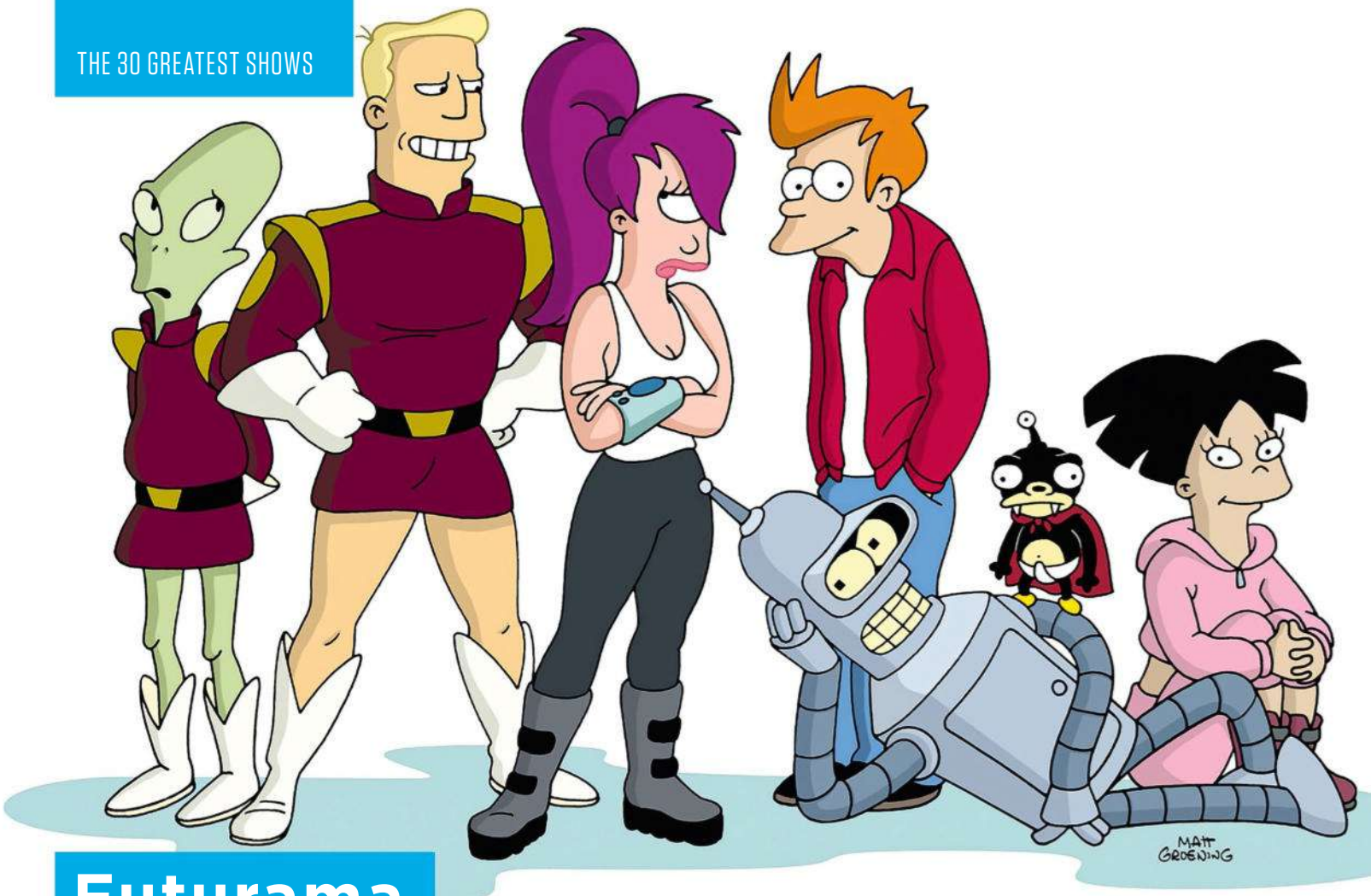
Initially, the show felt like an *X-Files* knock-off, assembling together a trio of unlikely collaborators – icy FBI Special Agent Olivia Dunham, eccentric "fringe scientist" Dr Walter Bishop and his slightly dodgy son, Peter – to investigate, on the down low, weekly cases involving weird science.

Then "The Arrival" introduced an Observer, a strange, pale bald man in a fedora, and its unique mythology was born. Every week John Noble's Bishop got more endearing and a little scarier, sweet Astrid held down the lab, and Olivia and Peter got closer, all becoming a found family made more vital with every episode. Then executive producers Jeff Pinkner, JH Wyman and Akiva Goldsman lowered the sci-fi boom in its first season finale by introducing a parallel dimension.

From that moment forward, those who granted the series their patience were amply rewarded with five seasons and exactly 100 episodes of engrossing serialised storytelling that swung for the fences because it was perennially threatened with cancellation. But the *Fringe* faithful knew what a gem it was. It never failed to surprise. The writers confidently laid out dense mythology and tasked their amazingly agile ensemble of actors to make us adore all versions of their characters.

They are what elevated the series beyond its procedural structure and created a complete story that didn't leave its loyal fans hanging. For me, *Fringe* took on another level of importance as it captured my imagination and heart so much that it sparked an idea embraced by the showrunners. This was then woven into the canon of the series in "The Boy Must Live", and still exists forever as my and Paul Terry's *September's Notebook*.

WARNER BROS TELEVISION/FOX



Futurama

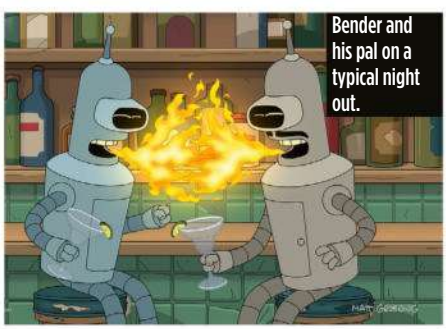
1999-2003, 2008-2013, 2023-present, 160 episodes
Disney+
Mark Gatiss, Showrunner/writer/EP (*A Ghost Story For Christmas*, *Sherlock*)

FUTURAMA BEGAN WITH A BIG problem. It wasn't *The Simpsons*. Developed by *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening and producer David X Cohen, it was commissioned as a response to the huge success of the other show yet there was an initial sense that this wasn't going to be in the same league. Indeed, how could it be?

Lightning doesn't strike twice, so how could anything hope to match the era-defining brilliance of the Springfield behemoth? But *Futurama* is a perfect example of how great comedy can grow, can be nurtured and loved, cancelled (numerous times) and come back from the dead to become very much its own thing.

New York, 1999. Philip J Fry is a very ordinary, slightly hopeless pizza delivery guy who wakes up in New New York 2999 after being accidentally cryogenically frozen. He then becomes a delivery boy again (sort of), working for the Planet Express Delivery Company alongside his descendant Professor Farnsworth, one-eyed mutant Leela, antisocial robot Bender and the joyously strange decapod Dr Zoidberg ("the important thing is I'm meeting new people!") among many others.

The premise (like a low-rent Starship Enterprise) means that the Planet Express crew can go almost anywhere and naturally do, encompassing time travel, monsters, mutants and rarified physics jokes along the way. Raised on '50s 'B' movies and (particularly) *Star Trek*, what's immediately apparent is that the show's creators know their stuff. There's a glorious rightness to the satire and also huge, huge affection. In the future, despite vast global changes, TV remains the predominant entertainment – one early episode even involves aliens (naturally stentorian, booming-voiced voiced aliens) threatening to destroy Earth because an episode of the long ago transmission of *Single Female Lawyer* was interrupted. You can sense that the whole show is infused with that shared love of the genre which began with TV showings of giant ants in the desert or Metalunans with giant foreheads all those years ago.


Bender and his pal on a typical night out.

One of my favourite episodes, "Where No Fan Has Gone Before", reunites most of the then-surviving crew of the Enterprise (now heads in jars) in a storyline where *Trek* became a forbidden religion, climaxing in a fight to the death by combat which just makes you grin with sheer pleasure at how spot-on it all is.

Because the show has had years and years to grow, it's developed a whole slew of call-backs and in-jokes. The dreaded Hyno-Toad. Slurm (the show's equivalent of Duff beer). Apparently benign but actually evil robot creator Mom. Hopeless Troy McClure-in-Space pilot Zapp Branigan and his put upon number one, Kif. And, of course, the wonderful Nibbler, Leela's pet; an impossibly cute little thing which eats everything and who might just have influenced a remarkably similar creature in *Doctor Who*...

But then, like anything good, the whole show is a fantastic tapestry of influences, steals and subversions. It's also, at times, extremely moving, becoming richer and more pleasing as the years go by.

20THC.FOX/EVERETT/SHUTTERSTOCK

Game Of Thrones

2011-2019, 73 episodes

NOW

Mark Millar, comic book writer

I ALWAYS GET INTO THINGS *LONG* after everyone else and *Game Of Thrones* was no exception. My barber would talk about it every month, baffling me with unpronounceable names and complex genealogy. Eventually, I caved and bought a box set when it was all over, but I have to admit I was sceptical. Like many people who work in fiction all day, I chill out to facts to keep a foot in the real world and am more likely to be watching *Channel 4 News* than JRR Tolkien.

Imagine my surprise when I burned through six seasons in four weeks. From the moment Jaime Lannister tosses an innocent child from the roof of a castle I knew this was the show for me. I'm a TV snob, but this was as good as anything else on HBO and such a clever subversion of genre material it genuinely changed the way I write.

THE TWILIGHT ZONE IS BACK!
SFX
No 1
GAME of THRONES
Eleven Westeros stars on the biggest TV finale in history
THE BIGGEST NEW MOVIES!

There's a formula to stories, a covenant with the audience going back centuries with beats that leave us satisfied if they're hit in the correct order. To mess with this is risky, but showrunners Benioff and Weiss *beheaded* the rulebook and no character was safe. What a treat for the audience to know that anything can *and will* happen.

I couldn't wait to go back and talk to my barber about this masterpiece. But I was too late again. He was already watching *Ted Lasso* and the circus had moved on.

A White Walker from the episode "Hardhome".

HOME BOX OFFICE

Eleanor, Chidi, Michael and Shawn in *The Good Place*.

The Good Place

2016-2020, 53 episodes

Netflix

Steven Moffat, Showrunner/writer/EP (*Doctor Who*, *Sherlock*)

I SKIP TO THE NEXT ONE. If you haven't seen *The Good Place*, I'd rather not spoil anything for you. I'm only writing this sentence to give your eyes time to flick ahead without damage.

Okay, *The Good Place* – and I'm still going to be circumspect, because some fool will keep reading. Yes, YOU. I'm looking right at YOU! I'm using special sentient words. I'm making eye contact.

Obviously, I'm saying this because there's a twist. And even saying there's a twist can spoil a twist, so that's a risk in itself. And while this twist, in the season finale, is a belter, it gave me something I enjoy even more than great TV entertainment: a glorious feeling of superiority. Because I knew something the poor fools making this show clearly didn't.

Despite the witty, effortless brilliance of the first series, they had made a show-killing mistake. I explained this to all my friends, wearing my smuggest smile. Well, I was aiming for smug – god knows how it came out. I'm old now; my face is mainly folds. Imagine a smirk on a pile of towels.

"You see," I said, all languid and hand-wavy, "the twist is literally TOO GOOD. The show simply can't survive it." I added a sorrowful shake of my head.

I wasn't wrong, actually. It was a sensational twist. Look, you know that old "the main character was dead all along" reveal? Yeah, well, this show started with that. Literally the first scene of the first episode: the main character, stone dead, arriving in the afterlife. Topping that takes something. Well, top it they did. A full-on, floor-shaking, paradigm-shifting gob-smacker.

"But at what cost?" I cried aloud. It was obvious to me that they had just ruined their own story. They had traded their future for one big shock moment. I tuned in at the start of the next season, looking forward to the rare thrill of pitying people much more talented than me.

And oh dear god.

I think the first few episodes of season two might be the most inventive, head-spinning, audacious piece of storytelling I've ever witnessed – apart from all the other episodes of season two. And, quite frankly, the entire rest of the series.

Those unbearable geniuses had not just gotten themselves out of the corner they'd reversed into – they came out blazing. Oh, I was so happy for them. I can still show you the punch marks in my wall.

I took comfort in one thing, though. They still had one big, in fact insurmountable, problem. It was, I declared, impossible to finish this story in any satisfactory fashion. And everyone in the room agreed with me. (I was alone.)

The next twist, of course, was that the last episode was entirely brilliant. And moving. And wise. And oh, please stop.

As my powers weaken and the winters grow colder, I hug to myself this one comfort: surely Michael Schur will never make another show as good as this one. But then I remember: nor will I.

NBC

Life On Mars

2007-2007, 16 episodes
BBC iPlayer, Netflix
Nick Setchfield, *SFX* Editor At Large

"AM I MAD, IN A COMA, OR BACK IN time?" asked existentially displaced copper Sam Tyler on a weekly basis, as the title sequence to *Life On Mars* played out. "Whatever happened, it's like I've landed on a different planet."

For many viewers it was a familiar world all the same, albeit one rapidly receding in the rear-view mirror of an asphalt-scorching Ford Cortina. Created by Matthew Graham, Tony Jordan and Ashley Pharoah, the series arrived in the wake of *Doctor Who*'s 21st century resurrection but used time travel in a distinctly different way.

John Simm's wary, bewildered Sam was every one of us, returned to the Brut-splashed age of 8-tracks and Watneys Party Seven. The show certainly knew how to deliver endorphin hits of nostalgia, from the cryptic smile of the BBC Test Card girl to the glam stomp of the Sweet's mighty "Blockbuster", but the sharp, sensitive writing also fixed a cold contemporary eye on the grime, prejudice and corruption of the near-past as well.

It was so smartly done. Sam was ironic distance in a leather jacket, the character that licensed the writers and the audience to relish the unreconstructed, *Sweeney*-style joy of it all. And in DCI Gene Hunt the series minted nothing less than a genuine pop-culture icon.

Brilliantly embodied by Philip Glenister, the Gene Genie was a bruising, swaggering force of nature, Godzilla – *Cop*zilla – in a camel-hair coat. But while he may have been the acceptable face of police brutality there was never any doubt that a very human heart was beating beneath the bluster ("I've never fitted anyone up who didn't deserve it!").

Armed with a terrific supporting cast, immaculate period detail and a killer '70s soundtrack, *Life On Mars* truly was the freakiest show, a pint-swilling, 'oop-guzzling, lout-thumping mash-up of police procedural, science fiction and historical drama. It may have seemed parochial, as British as warm beer and overflowing pub ashtrays, but the genius of the premise proved universal. Everyone, it turns out, has a Mars. Winning two International Emmy Awards for Best Drama Series, it's been remade by the Americans, the Spanish, the Russians, the Czechs and the South Koreans.

The world is surrounded by armed bastards.

Philip Glenister and John Simm: ACAB?

BBC

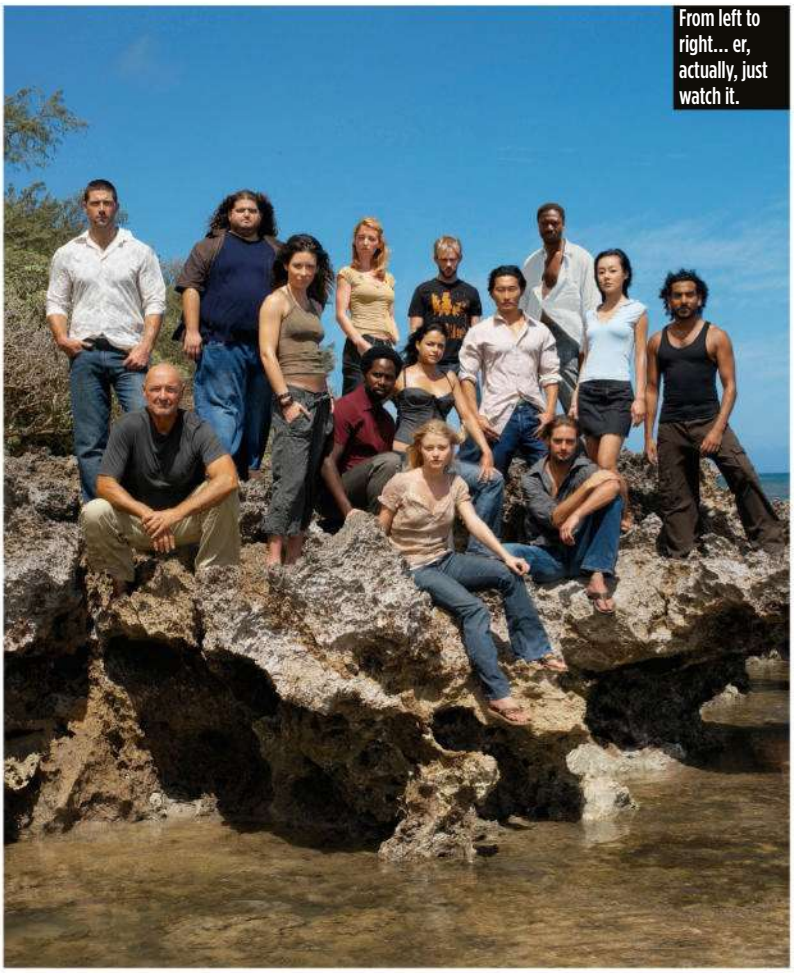
Lost

2004-2010, 121 episodes
Disney+, Netflix
Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, Director/scriptwriter (*28 Weeks Later*)

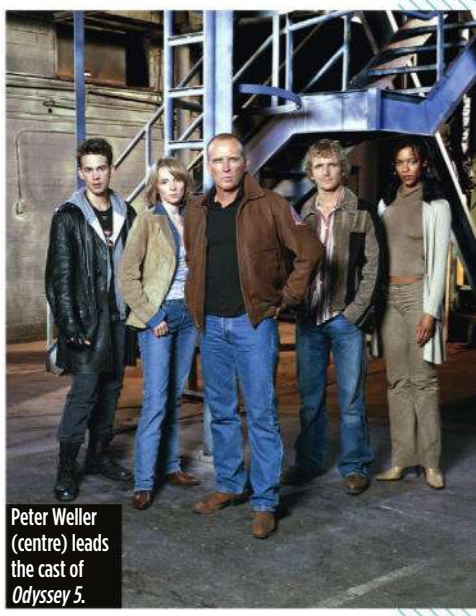
LOST HAD AN IMPACT THAT WENT FAR BEYOND THE USUAL boundaries of any successful TV show, leaving a powerful influence on the dramatic construction of television storytelling. A legion of storytellers followed in its footsteps, inspired by its deeply original blend of mystery, magical realism and science fiction.

It's a worthy heir to another great audiovisual "epiphany": *Twin Peaks*, the groundbreaking '90s series that revolutionised television narrative. Both shows share a fundamental legacy in their use of enigma and mystery as structural elements of their plots, keeping audiences in a constant state of speculation about what would happen next, only to surprise them with unexpected resolutions.

Along with my friend and collaborator, writer Jesús Olmo, we would lock ourselves in my house in broad daylight, draw all the curtains to plunge the room into total darkness, and project episode after episode on a big screen. Like addicts, we couldn't stop until we had devoured an entire season. But the most astonishing part came afterward: once our "fix" was over, the boundaries between our reality and the show's fiction would blur. We literally felt like survivors in a world that suddenly seemed strange, full of signs and mysteries we couldn't quite comprehend – but they made us feel more alive!


From left to right... er, actually, just watch it.

ABC TELEVISION


Peter Weller (centre) leads the cast of *Odyssey 5*.

Odyssey 5

2002, 19 episodes
Only available on DVD
Russell T Davies, Showrunner/writer/EP (*Doctor Who*, *It's A Sin*)

ODYSSEY 5 MIGHT NOT be my greatest *Desert Island Disc* show, but it's got a lot to love. And I want to give it space here for having the best premise of all time. Six astronauts are in the Space Shuttle, tootling about, happily doing whatever astronauts do. When the entire Earth below them explodes! Gone! And they're the only ones left! God, that's good. That's the most magnificent pitch, by a great old sci-fi stager, Manny Coto.

Okay, like all startling pitches, it's hard to follow through, and maybe the series had trouble catching up with that magnificent opening. Though it starred Christopher Gorham, so I was very happy to watch. But these days, with every launch of a rocket or shuttle, I think of that show. And I hope Elon Musk never saw it, or he might take it as a blueprint.

COLUMBIA TRISTAR / EVERETT/ALAMY

Things get quite strange *Over The Garden Wall.*

Over The Garden Wall

2014, 10 episodes

Apple TV+, Prime Video

Kate Herron, Director/writer/EP (*Loki*)

"SOMEWHERE, LOST IN the clouded annals of history, lies a place that few have seen – a mysterious place, called the Unknown – where long forgotten stories are revealed to those who travel through the wood..."

The Unknown is the setting for one of my favourite shows, *Over The Garden Wall*, and I find myself longing to travel back to the Unknown every year. For me, the best television has a clear sense of identity, and from the opening moment in which the frog named Jason Funderberker plays a lullaby on piano, it was clear to me that *Over The Garden Wall*'s team knew exactly what they were doing.

Created by Patrick McHale (formally of *The Marvelous Misadventures Of Flapjack* and *Adventure Time*) the show follows two brothers, Wirt and Greg, who find themselves lost in the Unknown and must find their way home.

The oldest, Wirt (voiced by Elijah Wood), is a melancholy teenage poet stuck with his younger eccentric brother, Greg (voiced by Colin Dean). It's this relationship, Wirt's worry mixed in with Greg's sweetness, that is the heart of the show – but also takes us on the many twists and turns, as they meet all who are hiding in the woods. With a voice cast that includes Melanie Lynskey, Christopher Lloyd and Tim Curry, it's a real treat for the senses too.

I am not alone in my passion; the show has a dedicated fanbase and is Emmy-winning, but it is interesting to me seeing where the show did bump for people when it came out. As someone who attempts to make television, I see this show not only as a masterclass of worldbuilding but also to get something this tonally complex on television is a feat, even more so when this is a show for families.

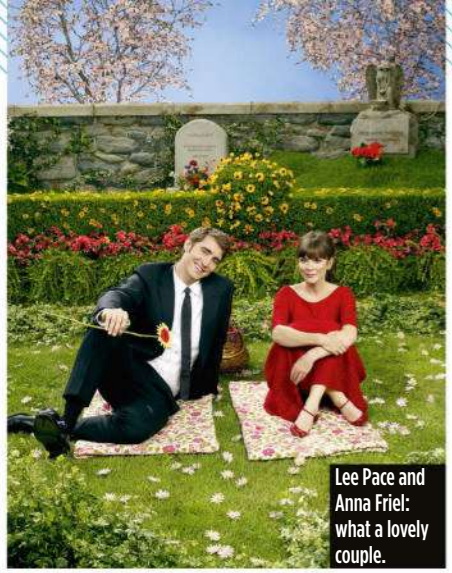
The bumps in question were whether it was too scary for kids, confusion with the tone in how it mixes comedy with the macabre, and the musical numbers – but for me, this recipe is what makes the show so perfect.

Subverting a genre works best when the identity of your show is clear and *Over The Garden Wall* blends the gothic dark-themes with family-friendly jokes with ease. We're all scared of the unknown no matter how old we are, so let's find the light and laughter in that.

As a kid I loved scary stuff and I love how this show handles horror. Many characters who at first appear scary turn out to be allies to the characters, or not what they seem at all. In a world that is now pushing any kind of otherness to be dangerous, a show which encourages empathy is not a bad message at all.

For the weird kids in your life (and if you are a grown-up weird kid), this is the one. Don't wait for autumn: get your cosy sweater out, find a fireplace and a frog and watch this show. You will never not want to make Potatoes and Molasses and not sing that song.

CARTOON NETWORK STUDIOS



Lee Pace and Anna Friel: what a lovely couple.

Pushing Daisies

2007-2009, 22 episodes

Apple TV+, Prime Video

Lisa Joy, Executive Producer/Director/writer (*Westworld*)

PUSHING DAISIES WAS UNLIKE anything I'd seen before. A Technicolor world with a magical Pie Maker; a girl named Chuck who came back from the dead; a lovelorn waitress with a penchant for bursting into song; a dog named Digby; and a chaste romance with live or die stakes.

It was such a weird show it's honestly incredible to me that it made it to air. But I loved its weirdness. The way it turned genre on its head. It was a criminal procedural where a diaper-wearing monkey driving a stick-shift car was the murderer of the week. In a time when ChatGPT has proven adept at imitation and recombination of existing material, the most precious works of art are those that don't fit into any box or template. Those that truly surprise.

Because they're weird; bursting with heart and ambition; occasionally chaotic; maybe even a little bit crazy. Just like humans. Though I take no credit for its inventiveness, it will always have a special place in my heart because it was also the first show I ever wrote on. It introduced me to the world of genre and the job of TV writing and for that I will always be grateful.

ABC

Stargate SG-1

1997-2007, 214 episodes and two straight-to-DVD movies
MGM+, NOW
Jayne Nelson, *SFX* contributor

IN 1994, ROLAND Emmerich's *Stargate* movie combined the nerdy joys of Egyptian mythology with space wormholes and alien overlords; the film's big-name headliners, Kurt Russell and James Spader, were the cherries on top of what was clearly a blockbuster concept.

The sequel TV show that followed in 1997 needed to operate on a much smaller budget, of course. Forget *Lawrence Of Arabia*-esque deserts: most of the planets our heroes now visited looked suspiciously like a forest in British Columbia.

Russell was replaced by the decidedly smaller-screen star Richard Dean Anderson, while Spader's gentle boffin was imitated, sometimes uncannily, by Michael Shanks.

But that core concept remained juicy: a universe-spanning array of Stargates that allowed for travel between worlds without all the futuristic hassle of "boldly going" from a spaceship. The show added token female character Captain Sam Carter, played by Amanda Tapping, initially standing her ground amid teeth-grinding '90s sexism until, finally, the writers figured out that they didn't have to mention she had ovaries and gave her a personality.

Then there was a taciturn brick-shithouse of an alien by the name of Teal'c (Christopher Judge), whose species had a serious quibble with the Goa'uld, the galaxy's Big Bads. The US-focused military themes stayed, although they were toned down a little and leavened by the presence of Shanks's moral scientist, Dr Daniel Jackson.

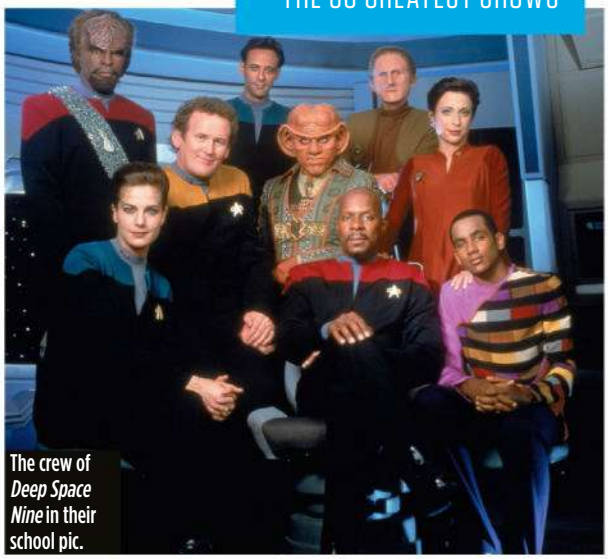
The result was an entertaining series that not only lasted for 10 seasons but also prompted four spin-off shows: the cheerful *Atlantis*; *Universe*, a dramatic powerhouse and arguably the best in the franchise; cartoon *Infinity* and a forgettable prequel, *Origins*. Oh, and let's not forget the TV movies, video games and even podcasts.

Sure, *Stargate SG-1* may have dated badly in places. Its repetitive formula started to creak as the years passed, even with the addition of *Farscape* stars Ben Browder and Claudia Black. And despite some fascinating, format-breaking ideas here and there, the series struggled to provide anything more than a cosy familiarity.

Eventually, shows like *Lost* sucked up all the energy in mainstream sci-fi, leaving the *Stargates* looking old-fashioned. But nostalgia for *SG-1* remains strong today, from its pumping, brass-filled opening theme tune to the iconic *whoosh* of the Stargate. Altogether now: "Chevron seven is locked..."

SCI-FI

They're a cheery lot down at the *Stargate SG-1*.



The crew of *Deep Space Nine* in their school pic.

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine

1993-1999, 176 episodes
Netflix, Paramount+
Robert Kirkman, Creator, Executive Producer (*The Walking Dead*, *Invincible*)

DEEP SPACE NINE WAS AN EVOLUTION OF *STAR Trek* at a time when *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was running. *Star Trek: Voyager* was very quick to start and definitely overlapped with *Deep Space Nine*. It was a completely different flavour of *Star Trek*. It was also the first *Star Trek* show that had a continuing narrative and had an episodic nature to it.

I watched it at a time when I was working very early on the *Invincible* and *The Walking Dead* comics. It was my lunch break show. I would make a pile of hot dogs, and then I would devour hot dogs while I watched *Deep Space Nine*. They did so many multi-part episodes, but with the Dominion War... it's like six episodes in a row that end with, "To be continued". And that would just ruin days for me, because I'd be like, "I guess I'm watching the next episode now because, I gotta watch it."

The storytelling of the Changelings, that started with Odo and then carried on throughout the entire season, when you find out that – to spoil things – they're behind the Dominion War, manipulating that quadrant of space and are actually bad guys...

You can definitely see a lot of DNA from *Deep Space Nine* – definitely/accidentally – in *Invincible*. There's a top cast and it goes into some really crazy stories that you wouldn't expect. The story with Tony Todd playing Benjamin Sisko's son, who has experienced a life without Benjamin Sisko because he's lost in time, is absolutely heartbreaking. Really top level stuff from Michael Piller and the crew that were heading up the writing. I absolutely love that show.

PARAMOUNT

LUCASFILM/DISNEY

Star Wars: The Clone Wars

2008-2014 and 2020, 133 episodes
Disney+
Henry Calvert, TikTok creator

AS KEVIN KINER'S SCORE blasts and Tom Kane starts narrating about disputes in the outer rim, it may not be John Williams and an opening crawl, but it sure is *Star Wars*.

Namely *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, the hit 3D animated anthology series headed up by the legendary George Lucas and Dave Filoni. A show which over seven seasons established itself as a pillar of the *Star Wars* universe and set a benchmark for all other TV projects in a galaxy far, far away to live up to...

After a rocky start with a movie which was essentially the first three episodes of the show, *The Clone Wars* quickly found its feet. It focused on the core dynamic of Obi Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker and Anakin's padawan, Ahsoka Tano, a series original – and of course the titular clones.

The show provided recognisable elements for long-time fans while also providing lots for new, younger viewers to latch onto. That's not to say the show catered solely to its younger demographic; more adult themes of loss and grief were often touched on and violence certainly wasn't avoided.

"Lair Of Grievous" provided the spluttering General a chance to show off how truly intimidating and evil the Jedi hunter can be. And "Revenge" saw the return of Darth Maul, who through his three seasons of tormenting Obi Wan Kenobi, a masterful performance by Sam Witwer and an imposing design, solidified the mostly voiceless character from *The Phantom Menace* as one of the greatest *Star Wars* villains of all time.

The Clone Wars gave fans the expansion they craved. It introduced us to countless new species, Jedi and planets. We were able to see relationships grow and develop in front of us as opposed to simply being told about run-ins with Gundarks we never see. The anthology structure allowed for stories of many genres and themes to come to the forefront.

A *Seven Samurai* homage, a guerilla warfare arc, a political chess match, a prison break... *The Clone Wars* had time to show us things we'd never usually get to see from *Star Wars*, making every arc and episode just as memorable as the last.

The lasting impact *The Clone Wars* has had on *Star Wars* is undeniable. Without Filoni's work on this show there would be no *The Mandalorian*, there would be no *Ahsoka*, and an entire generation of *Star Wars* fans would cease to exist.

Star Wars: The Mandalorian

2019-present, 24 episodes
Disney+
Roger Christian, Production Designer on *Alien*

WHEN *THE MANDALORIAN* LAUNCHED ON Disney+ it brought back the Spaghetti Western-in-space universe that we created for the first *Star Wars* film, *A New Hope*.

Jon Favreau based the Mandalorian character on the lone wanderer played by Clint Eastwood in Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns, which were themselves very much influenced by the lone samurai in Akira Kurosawa's samurai movies. He also set it on planets very similar to the dusty, Western-like locales we created in Tunisia for Tatooine. The series feels closely aligned with the *Star Wars* world the fans embraced and wanted back again.

With a convincing performance by Pedro Pascal, *The Mandalorian* found a way to engage the audience with a lead character who spends the entire series behind a mask. Introduced as a bounty hunter on a mission to rescue and bring in Grogu, a childlike Yoda character, Pascal developed a range of emotions the Mandalorian could build on throughout the series, especially the feelings of a parent to a child. In some ways it reflected the relationship of Luke with R2-D2, who saves Luke's life a few times – just as Grogu, using his underdeveloped Force powers, saves the Mandalorian.

The series gives us a science fiction world that's real and believable. Throw in some droids who bring fun to the thrilling dramatic action, a really appealing and iconic lead character and a baby Yoda who the audience fall in love with – plus an original score by Ludwig Göransson that uses natural sounds as music, integrating what Ben Burtt and John Williams created for *Star Wars*. *The Mandalorian* brings a new and fresh approach to the world George Lucas created all those years ago.

What let the series transcend to a new level of reality was the creation of the virtual studio in Los Angeles using what was termed the Volume. It meant that the camera could move anywhere, freeing the filmmakers from the limitation of the old technology of rear projection. The background moved correctly with the foreground as the angles changed, creating a reality never before available live on set. In the fully inclusive environment of a studio, the actors see it live and react accordingly. This was a game-changer.

For the first time, a scene of a spaceship like the Razorcrest landing meant that instead of the actor reacting to an empty greenscreen, the Razorcrest actually came down near him and all the reflections and drama became a unified experience. Skies and background action synced naturally, and shadows and reflections were seen through the camera, reflected off the massive video walls.

This revolutionised filmmaking, but Dave Filoni and Jon Favreau were not tempted to push the effects and overwhelm the drama. They kept the quest of the Mandalorian central, with a group of new characters and creatures in line with the *Star Wars* universe. It reignited the passion for the saga that George created back in 1977, fully respecting his vision to bring science fiction to a family audience and make it entertaining and real.

The Mandalorian: "Take it off! Take it off!"

LUCASFILM/DISNEY

Stranger Things

2016-2025, 42 episodes
Netflix
Darren Scott, *SFX* Editor

THE '80S. HORROR. SCI-FI. ALL BIG ticks on the list for many, myself included – but could anyone really have foreseen the cultural impact that *Stranger Things* would go on to have? At that time, original Netflix shows were still a relatively new concept, and a genre show might have been considered a gamble. If so, the bet certainly paid off in spades.

The story of a missing child in a weird American town where all is not what it seems has captured the imagination and hearts of people the world over in a way that's rarely seen. It's lightning-in-a-bottle stuff that's now a multi-platform franchise with theatre productions, live action immersive experiences, books, comics, albums, more merchandise than you can shake a CB radio at, and several theme park attractions. Plus it catapulted a 37-year-old Kate Bush song to number one around the world. And that's before there's even been a spin-off.

More than anything, it's just brilliant stuff – the theme tune alone gives me goosebumps.

Stranger Things' Eleven: what metaphor?

NETFLIX

Sam and Dean hit the demon-hunting road.

Supernatural

2005-2020, 327 episodes

Prime Video

AC Bradley, Executive Producer/writer (*What if...?*, *Ms Marvel*)

SOME SHOWS ARE JUST SHOWS. OTHERS become something more – a fixture in our lives, a constant presence through years of change. *Supernatural* was that for me.

When it premiered in 2005, I was a film student, the same age as Sam Winchester, watching him and his brother Dean take to the road in a '67 Impala, hunting what-goes-bump-in-the-night, taking on Hell and Heaven to save the world. Over the next 15 years, as I rambled along in my twenties, found my path – my road – in my thirties, and eventually watched the series finale while starting a family of my own, *Supernatural* was always there, riding shotgun.

That kind of staying power – 15 seasons, over 300 episodes – is like finding a unicorn in today's "cancel it after two seasons" television landscape. The traditional 20+ episode seasons gave us something rare and precious: time. Time for sprawling storylines, deep character arcs and relationships that evolved in ways six-episode seasons every three years could never match. Nowhere was this more evident than in the shifting dynamic between Sam, Dean and their father, John Winchester.

In the early seasons, their father was a defining source of conflict: Dean, the loyal soldier, idolised him; Sam resented him for the childhood spent hunting demons. *Supernatural* killed John off in season two, but his absence loomed large, his impact echoing across the series for over a decade. Then, in the final season, Jeffrey Dean Morgan returned for one last round of beers with his sons – and a chance for Sam and Dean, now men in their thirties with their own metric ton of baggage, to see him not as an unshakeable figure from their past, but as a flawed human who spent his life fighting off the darkness, both literal and otherwise.

That's what made *Supernatural* more than just a monster-of-the-week series. It was a story about family: the one you're born with, the one you choose, and how time has this way of healing wounds you thought would bleed forever. *Supernatural* wasn't just something we watched – it was the road we travelled together.

WARNER BROS

The Terror

2018-present, 20 episodes

ITVX

Toby Whithouse, Showrunner/writer (*Being Human*)

WHILE SEEKING THE fabled Northwest Passage, HMS Terror and Erebus become trapped in the Arctic ice. The crew must survive the harsh weather conditions, while being hunted by an elusive, supernatural monster.

It's essentially a "base under siege" story. But the danger isn't just the creature that circles the ice-locked ships, but the deadly climate, and the deteriorating sanity of the terrified, dwindling crew.

I started watching the first episode on a plane. Within 10 minutes I realised this was something special, something that needed to be experienced properly. I've watched the entire series three times now and with each viewing I find whole new strata of meaning, detail and even beauty.

Anyone who saw *Being Human* will know how much I love combining genres, and maybe that's why *The Terror* continues to have such an impact on me. The collision of the supernatural and the derring-do of a *Boy's Own Adventure* that goes horribly wrong, told through granular character exploration, is unlike anything I've ever seen.

In many ways it's a show about brutality. The brutality of the creature, the brutality of life aboard the ships with its lashings and starvation rations, and the brutality of the environment. As Jared Harris's Captain Crozier says, "This place wants us dead."

Every performance is a masterclass, none more so than Harris, who plays Crozier with painful, understated, dignified heroism. Paul Ready is so compelling as the gentle, overwhelmed Dr Goodsir, I had to check IMDb to confirm that this is the same actor who played Lee in *Utopia*.

Adam Nagaitis plays the antagonist Hickey like when you realise you're in a dream and can shape and mould reality. And his first on-screen murder is one of the most chilling I've ever seen.

The way the tension – and body count – builds slowly and inexorably, like the thickening ice that will eventually crush the ships, is beautifully paced. There is a dizzying seasickness as hope gradually slips away, and you realise these characters that you have grown to love will all die.

But it's the efficiency and delicacy of the characterisation that left me shaking my head in awe. Whether it's the entire devastating love story between two characters, that's played out across maybe seven scenes, and about 30 lines of dialogue. Or Crozier's voice breaking as he decides to detox from alcohol addiction in order to save his men.

Or Ciaran Hinds's Captain Franklin standing to receive someone else's applause. Everything you need to know about that character is in those moments.

Each episode contains about eight scenes that, had I written them, I would have taken the rest of the week off. There isn't a line, a beat of direction, a gesture or sound effect that isn't perfect. Now I want to watch it again...

AMC/ITV

Ciaran Hinds is about to experience *The Terror*.

The *Torchwood* team meet their match.

BBC

Torchwood: Children Of Earth

2009, five episodes

BBC iPlayer

Ian Berriman, *SFX* Deputy Editor

DOCTOR WHO'S SHAPE-SHIFTING "GROWN-UP" spin-off was best received in its third incarnation, a five-part event series stripped across a single week. An image of children standing motionless and saying, "We are coming" was the kernel of the idea. Working with *Coronation Street* veteran John Fay and *Torchwood/Doctor Who* writer James Moran, Russell T Davies expanded this intriguing visual into a gripping paranoid conspiracy thriller with one foot in the corridors of power and one in the domestic sphere.

The story reveals Captain Jack's role in a shocking cover-up – one which comes back to bite him in spectacular fashion, as Torchwood's Roald Dahl Plass base is destroyed by a bomb. In 1965, the British government traded 12 children to an alien race known only as the 456. Forty-four years later they return, grabbing attention by freezing children across the world in a series of displays of power, then demanding that we hand over 10% of our offspring. Their motivation couldn't be more ghoulish, as is memorably revealed when we see one of these thrashing Cthulhian monsters hooked up to the withered husk of a child, using it as a drug supply.

Children Of Earth went to darker places than any iteration of the Whoniverse before or since – including Downing Street, with its COBRA meeting discussions on devising a metric for deciding whose children will die proving particularly chilling. But it was still tinged with that quintessential *Torchwood* madness, perhaps best illustrated when the unkillable Jack is sprung from imprisonment – encased in concrete – with the aid of a stolen bulldozer, a punch-the-air moment of endearing lunacy.

Arguably the show's most enduring legacy, however, is the aftermath of the controversial decision to kill off Jack's lover Ianto, struck down by an alien virus at MI5 HQ. Fifteen years on, an impromptu fan "shrine" at a Cardiff Bay location is still bewildering foreign tourists – and even has its own Tripadvisor page!

Twin Peaks: The Return

2017, 18 episodes

Paramount+

Pete McTighe, Screenwriter/EP (*Doctor Who*, *Wentworth*)

IT'S SUBTITLED *THE RETURN*, BUT ALSO IT'S season three of one of the greatest television programmes of all time. This is an 18-hour movie, mainlining David Lynch right into our eyeballs. It's unstructured, illogical and unfathomable. It's deeply disturbing, hilarious and moving. And it's brilliant.

Nothing ever scared me more than Bob climbing over the sofa in the original series, until "Gotta Light", the Lynchian opus that is episode eight of this show. The man was a genius, and this is TV by his rules. Which means it's not TV at all. It's something other.

The much-missed David Lynch as Gordon Cole.

SHOWTIME NETWORKS / ALBUM/ALAMY

Ultraviolet

1998, six episodes
Channel 4
James Moran, screenwriter (*Doctor Who*, *Torchwood*)

JOE AHEARNE'S 1998 SHOW *Ultraviolet* was a game-changer for UK genre TV. A vampire show wrapped in a police thriller, it made vampires feel believable, basing their characteristics in science. Most of the vampire trappings were there – no reflection, wooden stakes, garlic – but with a modern twist. The team uses carbon bullets instead of wooden stakes, garlic-based gas grenades, and guns with cameras as sights to identify vampires (because they don't show up on any electronic devices).

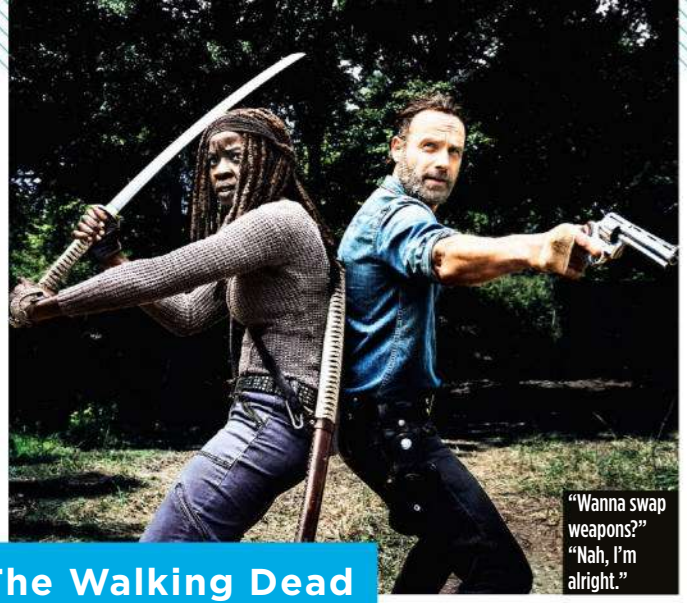
Above all else, on a purely shallow level, it was just really, really cool. Good-looking people hunting even more good-looking vampires, mysterious organisations, clever twists and a genuinely smart (and chilling) vampire plan for the human race. The highlight for me was episode five, "Terra Incognita", where Idris Elba's character was trapped in a warehouse with several time-locked coffins, counting down to the moment when they would release their vampires.

I still remember holding my breath as the timer ran down, and the climax is an incredibly clever example of using a dire situation to resolve that same situation. Ahead of its time in never saying the word "vampire" (instead the characters said "leeches", or "Code 5s" – V for 5, V for vampire), it led the way for shows like *The Walking Dead* to never say "zombie", adding to the realism. It lasted for one perfect season, burned through more plot and character work than most shows do across their entire run, flamed brightly and vanished.

We got enough closure to be satisfied, although it could have gone on for another season or two. But ultimately, I'm perversely glad it only lasted as long as it did. It never ran out of steam, threw everything on the table, and left us wanting more.

WORLD PRODUCTIONS

Cheer up folks, it might never... oh, it has.



"Wanna swap weapons?" "Nah, I'm alright."

The Walking Dead

2010-2022, 177 episodes
Disney+, NOW, Prime Video
Will Salmon, Comics Editor *Newsarama*

WE TAKE *THE WALKING Dead* for granted now – 11 years, 177 episodes and six spin-offs later. It has undoubtedly become a part of the televisual furniture, but that wasn't always the case...

It's hard to overestimate just how impactful that first season was when it snarled its way onto TV screens back in 2010. The ageing zombie genre had risen from the grave with films like *28 Days Later*, *Shaun Of The Dead* and Zack Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* remake, but it was *The Walking Dead* that truly brought zombies into our homes.

Adapted from Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore and Charlie Adlard's long-running comic, the show landed at the height of "peak TV" and came with some impressive names attached: *The Shawshank Redemption* director Frank Darabont and *This Life* star Andrew Lincoln as the heroic Rick Grimes, to name just two. Most importantly it looked the part, with impressive production design and some truly brilliant prosthetic effects on the ravening "Walkers". Rarely had TV horror been this full-blooded and fearsome.

The Walking Dead didn't always have an easy ride, mind. It burned through four showrunners: Darabont departed after the first season, to be replaced by Glen Mazzara, who stuck around for two before handing over to Scott Gimple and, finally, Angela Kang. And while it surged to ever-increasing viewership in its first five seasons, its middle years – aka the war with Negan and the Saviors – were marked by falling ratings, a relentlessly dour tone, and the sense that the show was relying on cheap shock tactics to get by. Glenn's brutal murder proved a step too far for many, even if comics readers had long known it was coming.

Even at its grimmest, though, *The Walking Dead* was always worth watching. Those who loyally stuck by it were rewarded by its rich world-building, parade of wonderful characters (many of whom, admittedly, died horribly) and some truly hissable villains. In its final years the show even managed a surprise critical resurrection.

It regained its warmth and humour and allowed hope back into what had become the darkest of TV worlds. Rick and Danai Gurira's Michonne moved on, but that allowed space for the rest of the cast to step up and take centre stage. Norman Reedus's taciturn Daryl and Melissa McBride's Carol became the new heart of the series, while Jeffrey Dean Morgan's performance as Negan turned the former villain into a more complex and human character, without ever losing his dangerous, unpredictable edge.

From the outside *The Walking Dead* perhaps looked like the same old show, year after year, but in truth it quietly reinvented itself repeatedly over more than a decade. It's that ability to adapt that has meant, even though the main series finally ended in 2022, the franchise continues to not only survive but thrive, some 15 years after Rick Grimes first woke up.

AMC

Watchmen

2019, nine episodes

NOW

Simon Racioppa, Executive Producer (*Invincible*, *The Boys Presents: Diabolical*)

I COULD PROBABLY name 20 to 30 other shows, but just staying with comics, *Watchmen* popped out. I love the original books. The show was not the spin-off you expected. There are 99 ways to make an okay *Watchmen* show, and maybe one way to make a great *Watchmen* show, and I feel like they hit that by just going off in a totally different way.

The emotions they hit, the cast they put together, the production quality of the show, I thought was all through the roof. The writing team and the themes they hit, I didn't know where every episode was gonna go.

Every episode was a brand new treat. It was like, "Oh my god. They're doing this totally original thing?"

And then, I also love that it was one-and-done. It was finished. It had a start, had a middle, and it had an end. I found that really appealing, versus a show that kind of stops, and then maybe there's another season, maybe not. No, this was: it's done. Here is the end!

They haven't made any more. I think that's perfect. It was one of the things, actually, that drew me to *Invincible*. Even when I was reading it, way before the show, the book builds to an end. And endings are just as important in stories as any other part. *Invincible* does it. *Watchmen* does it.

DC/WARNER BROS ENTERTAINMENT

Who watches the *Watchmen*? You did.

"I still say we fry it with a few onions and tatties."

The X-Files

1993-2002, 2016-2018, 218 episodes

Channel 4, Disney+, Paramount+

Doug Naylor, Director/Producer/writer (*Red Dwarf*)

I FIRST STARTED WATCHING *THE X-Files* in late 1993, and fell instantly in love. It seemed to me to have the perfect blend of strong writing and great characters, all set against a backdrop of science fiction, mystery, horror, conspiracy, thriller, procedural and comedy. Each week we were treated to either a monster of the week episode featuring a supernatural or extraterrestrial entity, or a mythology episode involving alien cover-ups and secret experiments. I was a sucker for all that and watched it voraciously.

RESULT! SPECIAL AWARDS ISSUE!
210 Adventures in Science Fiction
SFX
HYPERNAUTS
DAVID GEMMELL
So, Guess Who Won?
The X-Files Babylon 5 Star Wars & more in our hot awards issue!
PLUS! 12 Monkeys!

When Rob [Grant] and I created *Red Dwarf*, we decided to create a science fiction show that didn't involve aliens. We thought it would force us to explore the characters on the ship rather than rely on meeting a different breed of ET each week. That didn't mean I wasn't intrigued by the subject myself, though. I have a small library of books on the subject, as it's always fascinated me.

The X-Files arrived at the perfect time. The '90s was a decade of paranoia, and trust in government was at an all-time low. Nothing like it is today. Ha!

As I wrote this (I promise this is true), my phone rang and I received a message from an automated voice saying they were from the government and were about to take legal action against me for unpaid taxes. I'm sure this was just coincidence. I've unplugged my Alexa just in case though. I've also removed all the lightbulbs in my house on the off chance they contain hidden cameras. You can never be too careful.

Where was I? Oh, yes. *The X-Files*. It felt like a series of mini-movies to me with its high production values, eerie visuals and great sound design. It also, I believe, paved the way for *Lost*, *Stranger Things*, *Supernatural*, *Fringe*, *Black Mirror* and many more besides.

Along with the wonderful theme tune, I loved the great character dynamic between Mulder and Scully, both beautifully played by David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson. The chemistry between them, especially as the series developed, got better and better. *The X-Files* also had great villains: the Cigarette Smoking Man, Eugene Tooms and the Flukeman, to name just three.

I have many favourite episodes. "Bad Blood", "Ice", "Pusher", "Memento Mori", "The Erlenmeyer Flask", "Paper Clip" – and "Drive" written by Vince Gilligan and starring Bryan Cranston. I wonder what happened to those two? Probably my all-time favourite episode, though, is "Clyde Bruckman's Final Repose", written by Darin Morgan and starring Peter Boyle as a reluctant psychic who can predict how people will die. It won two Emmys.

Anyway, I have to go now, there's someone at the door. Two men, actually. They're both wearing identical black suits with white shirts, black ties, and black fedoras. They have unusually pale skin and expressionless faces. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. They're probably just a couple of funeral directors who've mislaid their coffin and are wondering if I've seen it.

The Truth Is Out There.

FOX TELEVISION

NOT MICKEY!

EAT, WORK, DIE, REPEAT. WELCOME TO THE LIFE OF MICKEY 17, AS DIRECTED BY BONG JOON HO

WORDS:
TARA BENNETT

Mickey 18 and 17, played by Robert Pattinson.

ACROSS SOUTH Korean filmmaker Bong Joon Ho's exceptional filmography, the only universal truth that's become clear throughout his 25-year directing career is that he won't conform to expectations, even in the wake of success.

"I have strange taste," a self-deprecating Bong acknowledges to *SFX*. "It's not like I intentionally try to make my films super-weird, but that's the response I get once the film is made. They're hard to put my finger on, and especially the marketing team – they always have such headaches trying to figure out what my film is about."

Inspired by author Edward Ashton's 2022 novel *Mickey7*, *Mickey 17* is Bong's more expansive and blackly comedic exploration of humanity's near future, one in which environmental catastrophe has pushed our species into the far reaches of space to establish beachhead human colonies on new planets – like that of Niflheim.

Those who have no power or wealth can volunteer themselves as lab rats known as expendables, for controversial experimental technologies like the human printing of DNA. The volunteer's mind is backed up in a server that can then be uploaded back into a printed replica of their body in case death occurs in the process of perfecting new vaccines, exploration or scientific procedures.

Mickey Barnes (Robert Pattinson) is one of those down-on-their-luck humans who volunteers as an expendable and spends the four and a half year journey to Niflheim "dying" and then getting regenerated by the medical staff 18 different times.

TAKING THE MICKEYS

Usually compelled to tell his own original stories, *Mickey 17* is Bong's first feature adaptation since *Snowpiercer*. Post global lockdowns in 2021, Warner Bros and Plan B offered the director a summarised treatment of the still unpublished novel to consider, and Bong says he was immediately "captivated" by the Mickey character.

"I thought that through him, I would be able to portray the current youth and current working class," the director explains. "Mickey in the original novel is more of an intellectual. He's a historian, but I found the potential for the character to resonate even more with contemporary young people, especially the working class, because it's about a guy who has to die every day for his job.

"I feel like that in itself is such a fascinating subject. Instead of focusing on a particular event that happened in a certain time, or a particular issue that we see on the news every day, I really wanted to focus on issues that have repeated throughout history, that surpass a particular time and place, and we always see them continue," Bong says of core issues like basic human value, environmentalism and the moral problems that come out of technological advancement.

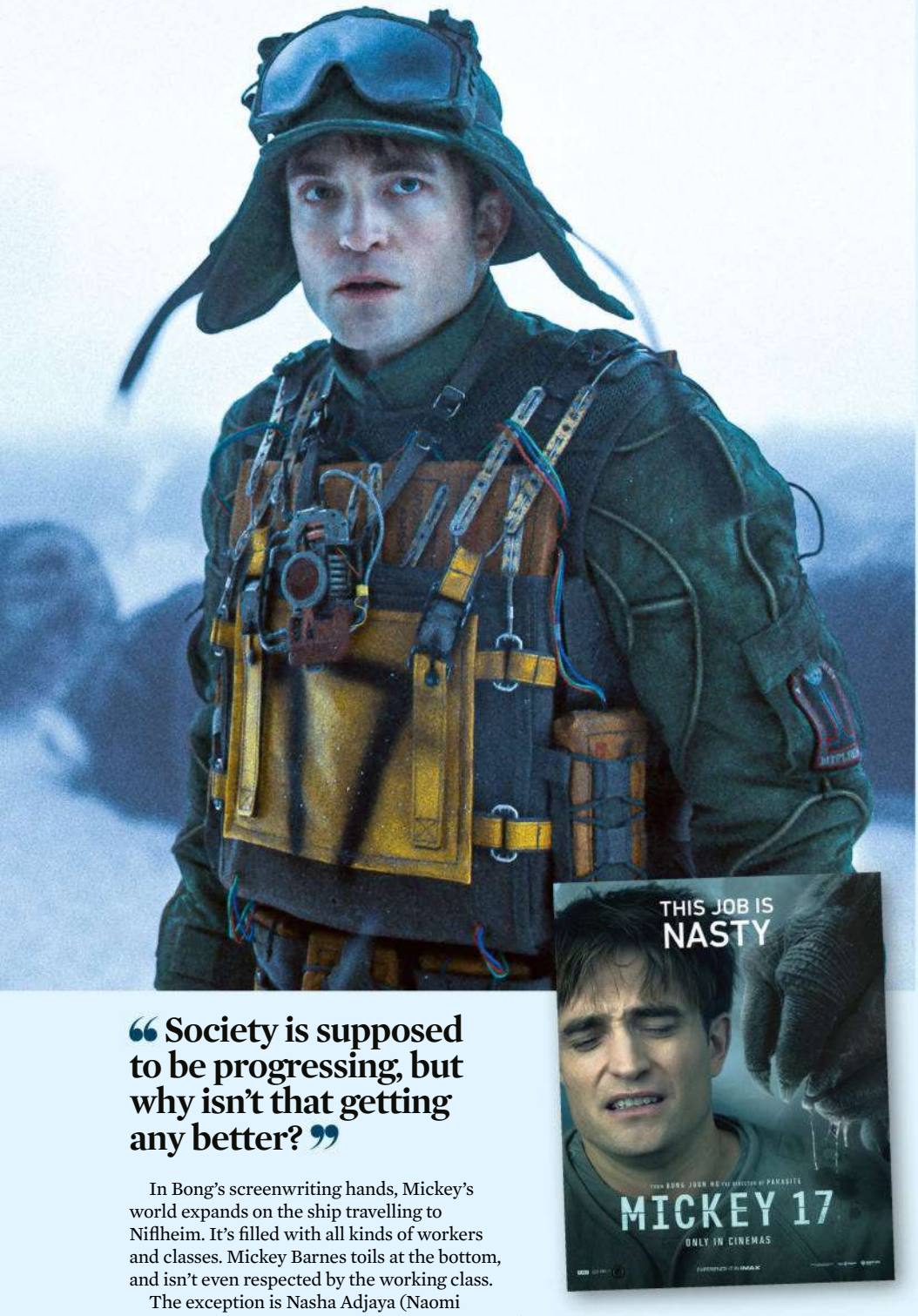
Naomi Ackie (Nasha) with Pattinson.

Director Bong Joon Ho lifts the mood.

"In *The Host*, we see a powerless family who receive no help from the government or the system. In *Snowpiercer*, we see, again, another powerless group in the tail section. That's sort of Mickey's journey in this film," Bong says. "He also does not have any power, no authority, no strength.

"But the main question is, why do we continue to see powerless groups like that when we talk so much about the future and advancements in technology? Society is supposed to be progressing, but why isn't that getting any better? I thought that this story really lends itself to exploring that question."

PICTURES: JONATHAN OLLEY/WARNER BROS. STOCK IMAGES: FABIAN ZURHEIDE, MAROOSHKA/GETTY



> **“Society is supposed to be progressing, but why isn’t that getting any better?”**

In Bong’s screenwriting hands, Mickey’s world expands on the ship travelling to Niflheim. It’s filled with all kinds of workers and classes. Mickey Barnes toils at the bottom, and isn’t even respected by the working class.

The exception is Nasha Adjaya (Naomi Ackie), a cop who immediately takes a shine to his kind heart, decent looks and strange existence of coming back again and again almost exactly the same... until a mishap when a Mickey 18 is regenerated, although Mickey 17 is still alive. The more docile 17’s existence is threatened by a more assertive Mickey 18.

Needing an actor who could play the script’s odd comedy, be a romantic lead to Nasha and also play the subtleties of different Mickeys, Bong said he naturally turned to Pattinson. “I’m sure many filmgoers will agree that there’s a certain toughness and strength that you sense from Rob, especially in his eyes,” Bong says. “We’ve seen him play superheroes like Batman, where there’s this unstoppable, rough energy to his performances.

“But at the same time, you sense this timidness and also some anxiety and this sense of being really vulnerable in the →

HIS STORY REPEATING

Robert Pattinson on playing Mickey 17 (and 18)

On being taken with the director’s *Memories Of Murder*

“I always want to work with directors where I see a performance they’ve already achieved with another actor and I think maybe, if I work with them, I’ll make a similar kind of performance.”

On the director’s ability to do physical comedy

“I hadn’t really done anything which had that similar kind of idea before. So, when I came across this movie, I saw the script and I was like, this is unlike anything I’d ever seen. I just thought it was going to be an extremely exciting prospect.”

On jumping between characters

“It took a little while to get used to it. The first week, we were trying to figure out exactly how to do it because it’s so difficult to know how it’s even going to read.”

On the difficulties of defining each Mickey

“It’s kind of a complicated situation because the audience has to see the delineation of the characters. But the characters within the story can’t appear too different, otherwise it would be incredibly obvious. We had to really calibrate the very finely tuned differences between them. Bong would be like, literally, ‘It needs to be more 17, or more 18.’ After a few weeks, I knew exactly what he meant. I wouldn’t be able to explain what that is, but he just knew where to push, as I’m sure I was confused a million times.”

On being asked the inevitable question about death

“I did find it a quite moving scene where he tries to actually explain what it’s like. I found it really interesting to say, if you’ve died and come back to life, and everyone’s like, ‘What was it like?’ that I have no way of explaining it. It’s the same thing as saying, ‘What was it like before you were born?’ If everyone is asking me this question the whole time, it does make you feel very strange. But then, I have a very, very simple outlook on life. I’m literally basically thinking about what time do I wake up in the morning?”

The Mickey conveyor belt just never ends.

Keeping track of the Mickeys is a full-time job...

characters that he's played before. I thought that combination was perfect for Mickey because he essentially had to play two roles. There are some scenes where we see 17 and 18 clash, and they have such different personalities, yet we see both of them in one frame. Naturally, I just thought Rob was the perfect actor to play this role, and that's how I ended up offering it to him."

Coming out of theatre and navigating her still relatively new path in movies, British actress Naomi Ackie put Bong on her aspirational list of collaborators after she was introduced to his work with *Parasite*.

"I'm really attracted to work that combines genres, and that doesn't follow a throughline," she says. "With *Parasite*, I was like, 'I have no idea where this is going.' You're being taken on a ride."

When she was told who her fellow cast would be, Ackie says she was "freaking out" at the calibre of performers, from Pattinson to Steven Yeun.

"Being able to work with this incredible cast was a really big deal for me," she admits. "I genuinely was so nervous, but also so excited to work with all of them. There were so many things at play that I was just like, there's no question in my mind that this is something I wanted to do."

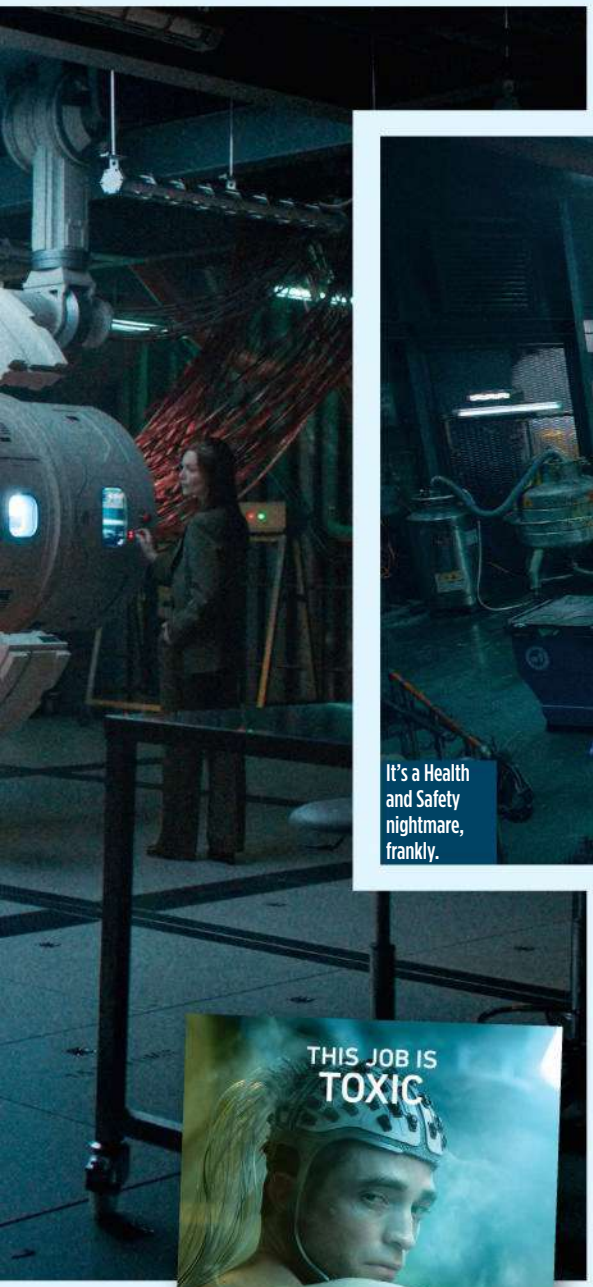
Ackie says she experienced plenty of technical firsts working with Bong, including shooting double to support Pattinson's dual Mickeys in certain scenes, and his style of shooting the storyboards, frame by frame.

"If director Bong is concentrating on the physical elements, then my job is to go from A to B within this frame and tell this section of the story without needing to concentrate on everything else," Ackie explains. "Interestingly, as I'm not focusing on this whole scene, we're allowed a lot of freedom within the frame to explore and innovate as I go along.

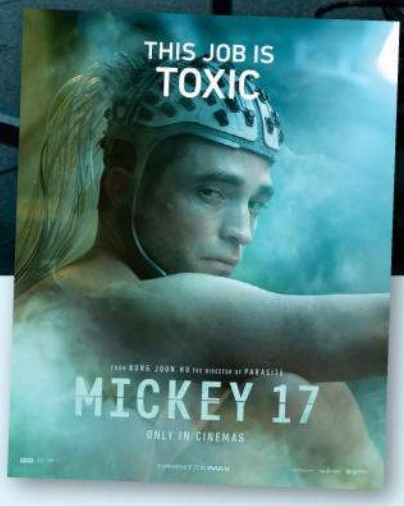
> **"Naturally, I just thought Rob was the perfect actor to play this role"**

"Obviously, you're familiar with the scenes and you know your lines, but you didn't have to really, really know them because in each frame, maybe you'd just have a line in it," she continues. "Maybe you wouldn't have dialogue at all. Sometimes it was just action stuff, or moving from one space or another, or an expression. That kind of isolation meant you put all of your attention onto that thing."

She swears it's a great way of filming now, but one that she didn't think she would assimilate into well. "It was funny, because when he told us he did it that way, I had no



It's a Health and Safety nightmare, frankly.



Bong Joon Ho has a go at piloting.

Hieronymous (Mark Ruffalo) holds court.

idea," she laughs. "We all looked at each other. It was me and Rob and Steven around the table, looking like, 'Huh?' But [Bong] was like, 'Five days, and you'll be used to it,' and he was completely right."

As his other most present scene partner, Ackie says she wasn't even aware in the moment how she changed her performance between the Mickeys. "Rob is so good that if I played it differently, it was because of him," she says. "The man works hard. We're doing the same scene twice, where he's switching in-between, and it's all very technical.

"But he gave such different energy with both. I guess there were subtle changes, but I didn't do it on purpose. It was more in reaction to what I was receiving from Rob, who is genuinely just a fantastic fucking actor."

As one of the most empathetic characters in *Mickey 17*, Ackie says she admired how Nasha was written to be protective of all versions of Mickey. "There is something about when you love someone, you love them through their different phases, just as with people who don't regenerate," she muses.

"People change, and the consistency of her love was something that I found really beautiful amongst the strange world that they're in. The throughline was very easy to follow, and very touching. You just hope that you have someone like that in your corner, in your actual life. Someone who without question is, like, 'I have this person's back,' and she's fierce with it. It's not soft. She's a fighter. Being able to represent that type of love, through that gaze was also super, super fun for me."

Bong's admiration for compassion extends to other species, like the Creepers – as named by a disgusted Hieronymous (Mark Ruffalo) – and Gwen, a huge, potato bug-esque native species that Mickey first encounters and treats with kindness. The director makes it clear that humanity's habitural hostile reception to what we don't know is a deep flaw, something which he's explored before in his films.

"If you look at animal documentaries, you realise just how incredible it is that they are so faithful to their instincts," he says about making heroic what is often deemed "monstrous". "There is a part of that that makes them feel even more sublime than human, and that's always my aim when I try to create features and films.

"Mickey treats them as creatures who are equal to him and treats them with respect, which is, I think, why the audience is able to empathise with the Creepers."

Ackie says Bong's humanist approach to expressing the value of all life permeates *Mickey 17* and is what ultimately makes such an eclectic film so accessible.

"What was so special about the story was the message was so clear, which is: people are not disposable. When the message is clear for a story, you know that you're in for a really amazing creative experience."

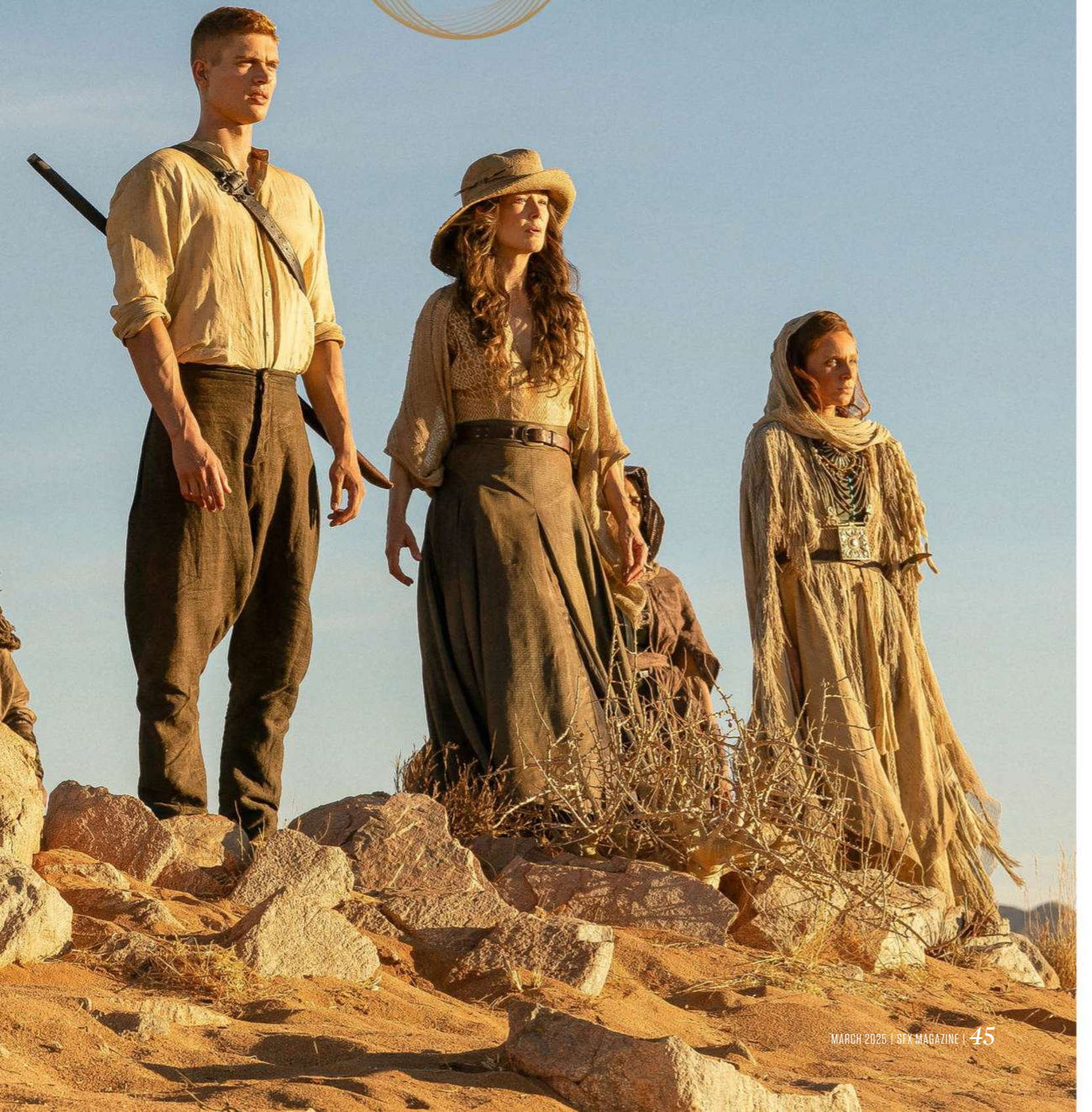
Mickey 17 is in cinemas from 7 March.

SPINNING

THE WHEEL OF TIME RETURNS FOR ANOTHER SPIN. *SFX* HEADS TO SOUTH AFRICA TO WITNESS THE SHOW'S THIRD SEASON BEING FILMED

WORDS:
JACK SHEPHERD

AROUND



THE SUN IS SETTING NEAR CAPE Town, South Africa, and *SFX* is driving to set. Dry fields and desert sprawl around us; cranes carrying huge lights pierce the darkening orange and blue sky. Our car pulls up at an artificial beach where a pirate harbour has been built. Wooden huts sit above water with gangways and planks between them. Boats are moored and kept in place by ragged rope. Fake fruit and fish are ready to be sold. The details are impeccable.

When night quickly takes over, torches are lit and actors, dressed as ruffians and sea merchants, take their places. The illusion is so great that it feels dangerous – like anyone could draw a sword – until the director calls cut and everyone breaks out in smiles. This is the bay of Tanchico, a major city in Robert Jordan's 14-volume *The Wheel Of Time* series, recreated here for Amazon's TV show, now entering its third season.

"The books change as they go on, they become more complex, they become darker, and they get better," showrunner Rafe Judkins tells *SFX* during a break from filming. "We need to always aspire to do the same with the TV show. Every season should get better."

The sheer scale of the production speaks to Judkins's ambitions: this season was filmed in both Prague and South Africa. The cast will soon be moving towards the Namibian border, where they will camp in harsher conditions to capture the feel of the Aiel Waste.

Rand and Lan are covering all bases in this fight.

BY THE BOOK

But before we get into too much high-fantasy terminology, let's recap. *The Wheel Of Time's* first two seasons see Rand al'Thor, a young shepherd from the Two Rivers, discover that he's the Dragon Reborn, the reincarnation of a fabled hero and humanity's only hope of defeating the Dark One. He's mentored by Rosamund Pike's Moiraine Damodred, a member of the Aes Sedai, a powerful coven of witches.

The second season ended with Rand defeating the Dark One's lieutenant Ishamael and the world learning of Rand's prophetical nature. Aviendha, a member of the Aiel race, declares Rand the Car'a'carn, or "chief of chiefs", the one destined to lead her people.

The third season sees Aviendha and Rand traverse the dangerous Aiel Waste with Moiraine, her warden Lan Mandragoran, and Rand's partner Egwene. Elsewhere, Rand's friends Nynaeve and Mat head to Tanchico, while Perrin returns home to the Two Rivers where there's trouble afoot.

Now, book readers, don't start burning copies of *SFX* – we know this is not what happens in Jordan's third novel, but his fourth – and even then certain plot elements have changed. That's by Judkins's design; the new season will cover events of books three through five, adding some elements from books one and two that were previously dropped.

> **"It's a weird show! It does strange things and it works best when it's doing that"**

"Each season is not an adaptation of each book," he says. "Each season is a piece of the adaptation of *The Wheel Of Time* series as a whole. This season, we're doing quite a close adaptation of four, and it's much closer than season one or two was to the books."

For Judkins, the key to adaptation is making sure there's an emotional throughline to the characters, which may mean changing the timeline of events or moving characters to

Rosamund Pike as Moiraine Damodred.

Galina, Liandrin and Tsutama mean business.

Mat Cauthon (Dónal Finn) in fancy local garb.

different locations. For instance, in the books, Mat goes with Rand to the Aiel Waste. "If we had stuck with the books, Mat would become a bit player this season," Judkins says. "It's important that he remains a main character, and that we follow him emotionally."

Judkins also wants this season to feel like we're "living" with the characters, rather than their actions just setting things up. "With shows that only do two or three seasons, it's hard to ever reach that point," he continues.

"With our season three, we know who these people are, so the relationships can become more complex and adult. The story that we're telling with Rand and Moiraine has layers and layers of emotional complexity, deeper than any of the stories we told in season one."

SFX drives to the other side of the studio lot, to an encampment of rugged Aiel tents. A fire roars outside. They're filming a big moment for Aviendha, who puts on a fierce fighting display, actor Ayoola Smart rolling around the sand, dodging incoming spear strikes. Watching a few takes behind the monitors, it becomes apparent the new season is being filmed in a more cinematic aspect ratio. It's a small detail that showcases the series' evolving nature.

"[We're] taking swings," Judkins says. "One thing you often find with big shows is that things can get blunted. When you have a huge number of eyes on something, if you do something weird, there's going to be someone who doesn't like it.

"We're lucky with how [Amazon's] letting us fly our freak flag. It's a weird show! It does strange things and it works best when it's doing that. It's not trying to be normal."

The series is changing similarly to the way that the books did, Judkins adds. "Robert Jordan was asked by his publishers to make them more like *The Lord Of The Rings*, but he was later allowed to let his freak flag fly. You can see it around books four, five and six, and that's when they blew up. They are much edgier and much more like television. The →

ROSAMUND PIKE *IS* MOIRAINE DAMODRED

The Oscar nominee talks channelling her Aes Sedai powers

How does the scale of something like this compare to, say, Bond?

We're building stuff on that scale, but they don't have to withstand an Aston Martin car chase. Horses, yes. Cars, no. I met somebody who took rock samples from when we were shooting in Tenerife [in season two] and matched it completely with the columns we were building in a studio. This season's on a huge scale, especially compared to season one, when we were just the seven main cast members. There weren't so many other people. Now, you look on the call sheet and see someone is cast number 376 and realise how much we've expanded.

Where do we find Moiraine in this season?

She doesn't really understand why she's in the Aiel Waste. Rand has gone against where Moiraine thinks he should go. She thinks he should go take this sword called Callandor, which is the greatest weapon known to man and only the Dragon Reborn can take it, so she feels that's a logical place to go. Yet the Aiel prophecies are saying that this man is meant to come and Moiraine starts to understand there is a reason why they're there.

How has Moiraine's relationship with the Aes Sedai changed?

Moiraine's a very loyal person. She's dedicated her life to finding the Dragon Reborn, but she believes in the structure of the White Tower as a force of good. She is aware that there are factions at play that are making it a very dangerous place, and there are sisters who can no longer be trusted.

Rafe said that you asked to use your powers more this season...

I didn't sign up to have my powers taken away in season two! I wanted to see Moiraine at the peak of her channelling powers because that's exciting.

DANIEL HENNEY *IS* LAN MANDRAGORAN

Moiraine's warden has bonded back with her – now he's training the Dragon Reborn

Does this season feel bigger?

It always feels big to me, but coming to South Africa feels like, "Oh, this is a little different. This is a big jump." Everything screams scale and excitement. We're going to spread our wings a little more. I'm confident that this will be our best season. And I like that it feels like camp – all the actors stay in the same place. We're working our balls off. It gets super-hot, but that bonds you.

Where do we find your character this season?

Last season was quite formative for him, spending time away from Moiraine. Now, after the rebonding, she sees him in a different way, and he sees her in a different way. They're equals and that's what he wants. This season is about home for a lot of the characters. Moiraine has represented home to him for a long time, and he's starting to open his mind to his real home and shifting his focus to that.

What is his relationship with Rand like?

Lan understands that Rand needs a strong male figure. In season one, there wasn't a lot of trust between them. Lan was doubting him. Who was this kid? He was snarky at times. But Lan knows now that Rand needs a strong figure to look up to, to build a foundation for him, so he's teaching him through swords. That's more mental training for him because he's got so much going on that he needs something almost meditative that he can rely on. Those scenes are really beautiful. It's teaching him how to relax throughout this chaos.

What are you most excited for people to see this season?

I'm so proud of the costumes and the scale. I've got a lot of cool action stuff, some cool scenes with Ran, sparring and training.

Elayne, Egwene and Nynaeve saddle up.

earlier books are very skewed to one character and rely heavily on traditional fantasy tropes which would be hard for us to put on TV and not be compared to *The Lord Of The Rings*."

The "one character" Judkins refers to is Rand. Fans have complained that he's been sidelined compared to his book counterpart, but Judkins explains how the writers wanted to give other characters more depth. Now, come season three, Rand is front and centre.

"We've been hiding him a little bit so that you don't become so reliant on him," he says. "There's a version that, when he becomes the Dragon Reborn, the whole show shifts its focus to him. The way that TV storytelling works, as opposed to a novel, is everything can start to feel about one character, and if you're away from that storyline, then you're not in the heart of the show any more.

"We worked hard to make sure people cared about those other characters, and this season, we spend a lot of time with Rand and see him in a totally different way. You get closer to him, inside his head and his relationships.

"He is the central character of this season, but we needed to make sure that, when you're with the other characters, you feel like you're in the heart of the show still. In what Robert Jordan wrote, what other people are doing matters just as much as what Rand is doing. That set the tone for us."

WORLD BUILDING

A day later, *SFX* returns to set, this time to walk the confines of Cold Rocks, an important Aiel settlement. Production designer Ondřej Nekvasil tells us they meticulously recreated the look of the rocks near the Namibian border so the two filming locations feel part of the same world. There are houses built into the rock and they are all fully kitted out. The cameras may never venture inside, but these details create the illusion of a lived-in world. "We don't have as much money as some of the other big fantasy shows, but everyone puts everything they have into making it feel as big as we possibly can," Judkins says.

> "Everyone puts everything they have into making it feel as big as we possibly can"

That's especially true of the season's opening 15 minutes – a magical fight between good and evil witches at the White Tower, described as a "massive action set-piece with women in their forties and fifties just fucking shredding each other" – and the seventh and eighth episodes, that "feel like two back-to-back season finales".

"We have these three storylines going on this season and felt like the Perrin storyline really needed a whole episode to itself, so episode seven is this epic finale to that," Judkins teases. "When you're watching it, you almost forget about Moiraine and Rand and Egwene, but then you get the actual finale which is huge for these other characters."

A few months later, after the first trailer drops, *SFX* catches up with Judkins. "This season has really come together, our teams are firing on all cylinders," he says. "The VFX work is just unbelievable. It looks good in the trailer, but that's not even finished, it is going to look even better."

The footage puts Moiraine and Rand's relationship front and centre, with Pike's character saying that she has looked into a

STOCK IMAGES: GEENGRAPHY/GETTY

Olivia Williams as Queen Morgase Trakand.

Priyanka Bose plays Alanna Mosvani (centre).

Sophie Okenedo as Siuan Sanche. Eek!

thousand futures and in none of them do they both survive. "Right from the first episode, the stakes are raised, lives are on the line," Judkins elaborates. "We are going to lose a few people we love, some that will be unexpected, and that is weighing on our characters the whole way through the season."

The turnaround between seasons has lengthened, with 18 months passing between seasons instead of a year. "Ideally, you want it to be a year, that's what I'm always working towards," he says. "I'm hopeful that we can reduce that gap in the future, and we've proved that we could do it in post."

Amazon has yet to renew the series, but Judkins says there was never a chance the show would get a satisfactory ending in just three seasons. "I can see versions of the show that are six or seven seasons, but part of what makes the series great is the length. It's one of the reasons people read it and it stands alone in that sense. But I'm always realistic.

"I'm *sure* everyone will be happy if they're like, 'Oh, can you just do a satisfying ending in season four because we don't make shows that long any more'.

"The truth is, the property doesn't lend itself well to that. My job is to do everything I can to get it to the end and give you Jordan's ending because it's so powerful. It really does stick the landing.

"And if we don't, my job is to make sure we're telling a great story up to that point."

The Wheel Of Time is on Prime Video from 13 March.

JOSHA STRADOWSKI *IS* RAND AL'THOR

The Dragon Reborn talks being a different kind of chosen one

Where do we find Rand this season?

There's a real difference with season two where people wanted him to be the Dragon and Rand didn't want it. Now, Rand has an agency. He wants to fulfil the prophecy, and he's looking for people he can trust. Egwene gives him that, but he can't show himself fully to her because she's afraid of the dark side of him. Then he's with [member of the Forsaken] Lanfear who accepts him fully, the dark and the light, and at the same time, he balances her out, because he brings the lightness out of her. But she's the Devil. You can't love the Devil, or can you? Then there's Moiraine, who has been with him for a long time, but now she doesn't see who he has become. She doesn't listen to him. It seems like he can't trust her any more.

What makes Rand different to other "chosen one" characters?

There is a simpleness to his upbringing, the amount of love he was given growing up. What happens to Rand throughout the series is very dark. You come to a point where you think, "How is he able to still do the right thing?" That's only because of the love [his adoptive father] Tam gave him. It's so strong and honest, and something no one can take away from him.

What's so beautiful about season three is that in the [Aiel] city of Rhuidean, Rand goes through the lives of his ancestors and you see the sacrifices they had to make and the fights they had to fight, and it all leads up to Tam finding that baby on a mountain hill and taking him home and treating him like his own son.

You wear prosthetics this season...

I play all Ran's ancestors myself. That process of working with make-up, effects, costume was so creative. I play a guy in his sixties and it took seven hours to get ready for set! I had to find a character while the camera was on my face. It was very challenging.

A DANGEROUS MASTER

THE TEAM BEHIND NETFLIX'S ADAPTATION OF SIMON STÅLENHAG'S THE ELECTRIC STATE TALK ABOUT HOW THEY'VE BUILT ON THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

SWEDISH ARTIST SIMON Stålenhag's milieu is crafting intriguing character-based narratives that are supported by his haunting paintings, often featuring retro-futuristic technology existing in traditional landscapes.

Graphic novel *The Electric State*, his 2017 post-apocalyptic hit, is an intimate tale about the human Michelle explaining how she came to be on the road with the robot Skip to find her long-lost younger brother. It's cinematic, moody and builds to a big reveal, making it one of Stålenhag's most loved books.

Not surprisingly, it attracted the interest of Hollywood – specifically AGBO, the production company founded by Joe and Anthony Russo – before it was even published. Andy Muschietti was attached to direct and the screenplay adaptation was undertaken by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely.

From 2017 to 2020, the writers and the Russos diligently worked on keeping the spirit of Stålenhag's narrative, including specific visuals from the page, while expanding the world-building, including a backstory about a human/robot war that's alluded to in the book. Then Muschietti departed for other projects, and the Russos decided to direct *The Electric State* as their second Netflix feature project.

"How do you make a big, giant fantasy film that honours the level of detail and inventiveness and vastness that Simon suggests in his art, and in his sort of vague narrative?" Anthony Russo says of the challenge which faced them. "At the same time, be able to afford to do that at a big scale. That's how we found the tone. That's how we found the type of movie it was going to be."

McFeely says they fell in love with the core concept of a girl and this drone/robot crossing the country to find her brother. But they

decided they had to start their story in a period before the book's narrative.

"There's a before and an after for both narrative purposes and world-building purposes," McFeely details. "So what was the before and the after? For us and for Simon, to some degree, it's a different kind of war. It's called the AI War. And our AI is represented by various robots that are implied and sometimes taken straight out of his work."

The film opens with a prologue that sets up this alternate but still familiar version of history taking place from 1990 to 1994: the period leading up to the war and then the aftermath. Viewers see events through the eyes of Michelle (Millie Bobby Brown) and her brilliant younger brother Chris (Woody Norman), who before the war are supportive siblings with their whole lives ahead of them. Post-war, Michelle is a troubled orphan living in foster care after her mum, dad and Chris were killed.

She exists in an America littered with the detritus of defeated robots. Those still operational were remanded to an Exclusion Zone in New Mexico. Tech is now controlled by Ethan Skate (Stanley Tucci), who plays an Elon Musk-meets-Bill Gates style tech leader whose company helped turn the tide of the AI War. He's the purveyor of ubiquitous VR-like contraptions called neurocasters (think helmet smartphones on steroids) which allow humans to plug in and escape.

As *The Electric State* takes place in that nostalgic sweet spot of Amblin Entertainment's heyday, the Russos adopt the signature look and feel of those Spielberg-produced classics, including a vibrant colour palette that's reflected in the southwest US locations and the still operational robots. They worked out the details of this world which would have advanced AI robotics, but not the tech we use →

in 2025. “We decided they had autonomous robots in 1994, but no cell phones,” McFeely explains. “They’ve got neurocasters. So we’re not trying to drag everything back into 1994. We’re just trying to say we took a slight narrative timeline detour here, and as a result, this grew and developed.”

Certain iconic visual touchstones also made the cut, like having the Planters peanut brand mascot, Mr Peanut (Woody Harrelson), become the elder statesman for the AI robots, and ultimately the signer of their peace treaty with the humans.

Markus says this robotic version of the mascot came out of them asking, “Wouldn’t it be fun to take this thing you’ve seen your whole life and basically download an entire history and personality? That became so kind of giddying,” he laughs. “It almost felt like taking a 70-year-old superhero and giving him a modern problem.”

TRASH TALK

Around Mr Peanut, however, they created their own original ensemble of outcast robots to temper that nutty swing. “If every character we met was branded, then for me, it takes me out of their personalities,” McFeely says of their decision not to rely entirely on iconic commercial IP.

“Yet on a visual level, we wanted to definitely make sure that they looked like they were from the whole timespan of robots,” Markus says of their designs, many of which are pulled from Stålenhag’s pages, or are deeply inspired by what’s established in his paintings. “Some of them are old-fashioned. Some of them are much more modern and functional, so that, in a way, you could have ages. They’ve all been essentially thrown in the trash, and that’s what a junkyard looks like.”

Anthony Russo adds: “One of the things we discovered along the way is because we’re dealing with an alternate version of history, we had to have a certain threshold of actual history in order for it to feel like some version of history and not just like a complete fantasy world that never happened.

“There’s a balance between how much we have to be specifically evocative of something that happened, and that you may remember, or part of this didn’t happen but it feels like it could have. It was us walking that line constantly in terms of where we would land on the stylistic design spectrum.”

When it came down to the final decision on how to bring these robotics to life, they ultimately went to some of their previous visual effects collaborators like Digital Domain, ILM, Lola VFX and others to get the best performances out of the tech characters.

“It’s the most tech-intensive movie we’ve made,” Joe explains. “The majority of the characters are CG. [We used] a very experienced team of motion-capture players who did a great deal of detail work, developing the nuances and the subtleties and the behaviour that informs the reality of these characters. This is by far and away the hardest VFX film we’ve ever done, but the quality of the VFX in it are just superb.”

It wasn’t lost on them that Stålenhag’s book was remarkably anti-tech in the way he starkly illustrated the detrimental effects of the neurocasters, which pull humans into an all-encompassing addiction akin to heroin or meth.

Michelle (Millie Bobby Brown) with Cosmo (Alan Tudyk).

Russos Joe and Anthony with Millie on set.

Yet they made a decision to make a version of the story that is not as dire.

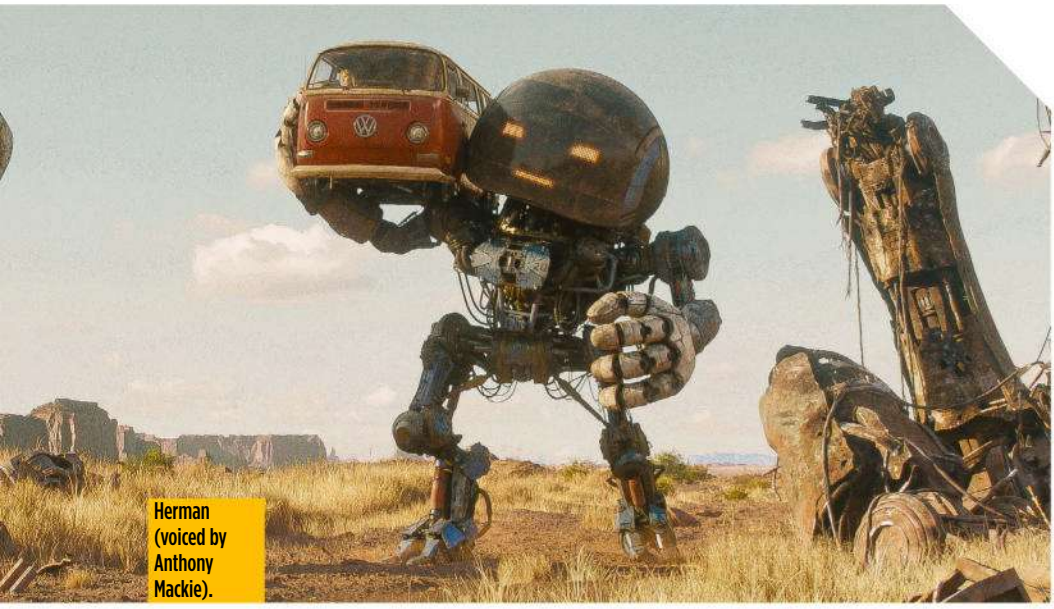
Markus says that in the early days of development they did seriously toy with portraying that dark future. However, they pulled back on that, so as not to reduce the conversation to a binary “tech is bad” approach.

“In the movie that exists, there’s still a darkness,” he says. “If [Michelle] takes a left on a street, you may well find desiccated corpses wearing neurocasters. Everything that happens in the book can still happen in this world.

“But the inevitable

PICTURES: PAUL ABELL/NETFLIX; STOCK IMAGES: CONSTANTINE JOHNNY, WIRATGASEM, REZA RASENDA/GETTY

VW vans certainly are sturdy, it seems...



Herman (voiced by Anthony Mackie).

underlying moral of two-thirds of all fantasy and science fiction is 'Humans suck'," he continues, and that is inherently more interesting to them. "Yes, technology may have had some downsides, but it's the human interface with it, and what they choose to do with it, that's the problem. In the end, it's a story about, are you engaging or switching yourself off? The fun of this is that it's the robots who want to engage and humans who want to switch off."

Joe concurs, adding, "It's not an anti-tech movie. It's a movie about having a healthy balance with tech in your life. There's lots of positives to tech and there's a lot of negatives to it. You've got to overcome the negatives and have a healthy relationship with it.

> **"It's not an anti-tech movie. It's a movie about having a healthy balance with tech in your life"**

"Those who are most technologically exposed are under the age of 25 in our culture," he notes. "This movie is intended to reach a wide audience, but specifically an audience of young people who have iPhones and iPads glued to their hands all day long. The tone has been carefully calibrated to appeal to that age range so that they will actually sit and watch the movie."

For that message to come through, they say Brown's Michelle is the perfect conduit. "Michelle is going to change a number of people along the way through her steadfast determination," McFeely says.

THEY, ROBOT

Because Michelle starts as a tech-averse young adult survivor of the AI War, there's much for her to learn in her journey across the Southwest and Pacific Northwest with mysterious robot Cosmo as her companion. The character was one of personal importance for her and Chris, and the robot will incite an equally personal quest that will flesh out who, or what, is ultimately responsible for their current post-war existence.

Through other humans she meets, like Chris Pratt's junk trader Keats, or robot allies like Herman (Anthony Mackie), Michelle will uncover hard truths about her brother, the culpability of the robots in exile, and ultimately choose whether a new middle path is the better road to travel.

Though Stålenhag's book is a self-contained story, his post-apocalyptic world contains a multitude of untold potential as implied in every one of his detailed paintings on the page. Anthony Russo says his work inspired a wealth of ideas as they developed this script.

"When you see Simon's artwork in his book, you just have this feeling that there is a narrative happening beyond what you're able to access graphically, or even verbally through the text," he says with enthusiasm.

"That was one thing we just loved about it, the fact that it was a vast world with a vast and complicated history and characters all over the place that you could explore. We wanted to hold on to that as we crafted the movie, and to allow ourselves, and others potentially, to see what those things may be in the future."

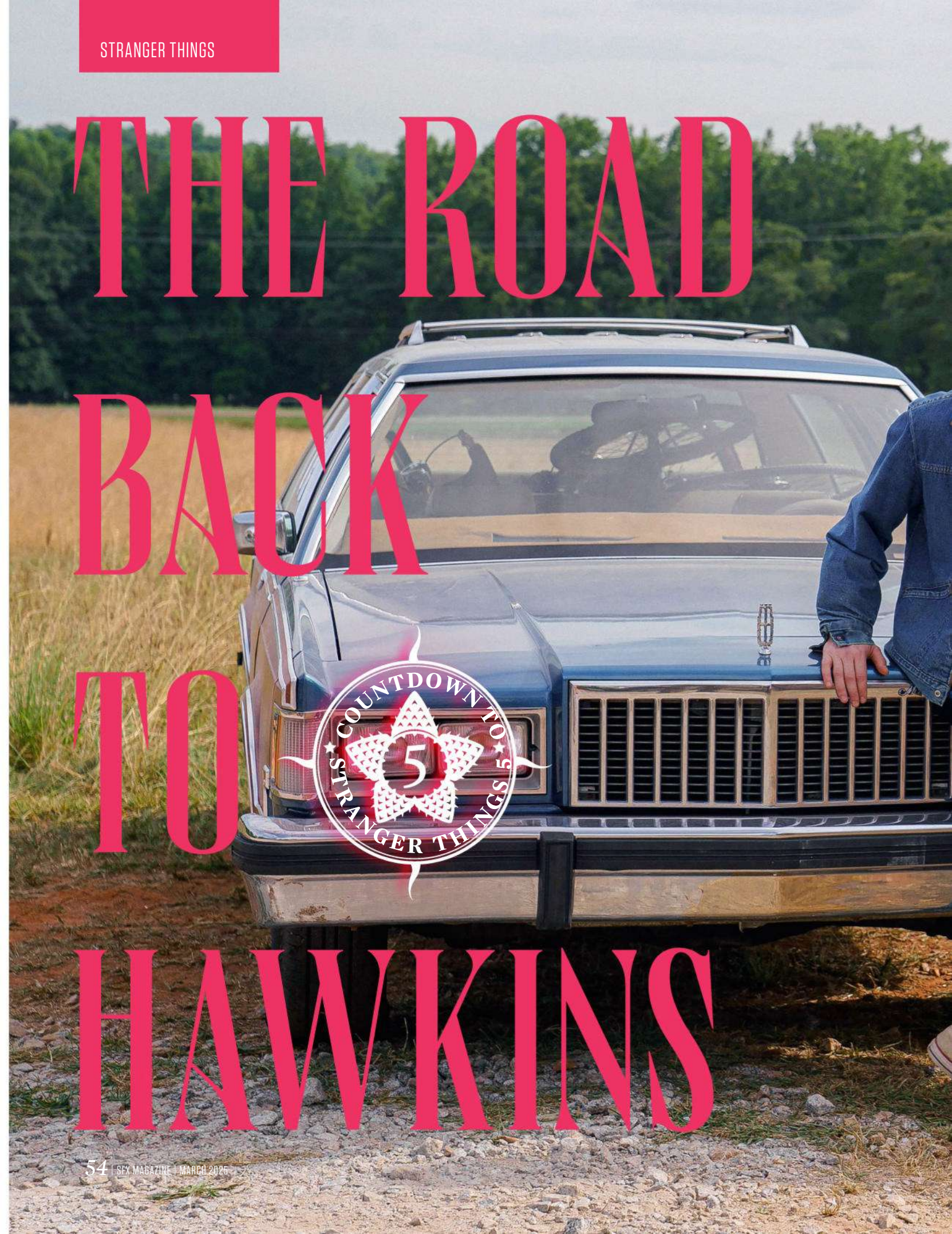
Markus says if Netflix audiences around the globe receive their interpretation of *The Electric State* well, they're ready to return to this world to explore and maybe revisit characters via narrative paths that didn't fit in this first chapter.

"There's a tremendous amount of backstory, and there's an implication of the future story," Markus confirms on where they leave audiences. "A next thing doesn't necessarily have to be, 'What does Michelle do the next day?' It's, how did we get here? How did that robot get here? Who are those [robot] scabs over there? Are they just monsters? How did that happen?

"There's story potential in so much of it, and with her."

The Electric State is on Netflix from 14 March.

THE ROAD BACK TO HAWKINS



EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW IN THE COUNTDOWN TO THE FINAL SEASON OF

STRANGER THINGS

WORDS:
DARREN SCOTT

The gang are clearly delighted to be back.

The fifth and final season is due to launch on Netflix later in 2025. Filming began on 8 January 2024 and wrapped on 20 December.

Writing for the fifth season began way back on 2 August 2022 – the entire season had been mapped out prior to season four being filmed, due to the pandemic. However, the season five finale was altered following feedback to season four.

Some unused ideas for the second season have been used in season five.

The *Stranger Things* writers team has described season five as "if season one and four had a baby which was injected with steroids".

Rumours that the season will be split into two parts – as with season four – have not been confirmed.

Returning as series regulars are Jamie Campbell Bower, Millie Bobby Brown, Cara Buono, Natalia Dyer, Priah Ferguson, Brett Gelman, David Harbour, Maya Hawke, Charlie Heaton, Joe Keery, Gaten Matarazzo, Caleb McLaughlin, Amybeth McNulty, Winona Ryder, Noah Schnapp, Sadie Sink and Finn Wolfhard.

Linda Hamilton also joins the main cast in an undisclosed role.

Episode titles for season five were revealed on *Stranger Things* Day – celebrated on 6 November, the date on which Will Byers disappeared.

1 "**The Crawl**", directed and written by the Duffer Brothers.
2 "**The Vanishing Of...**" This title is incomplete, and director and writer(s) are yet to be announced.
3 "**The Turnbow Trap**", directed by Frank Darabont.
4 "**Sorcerer**", directed by the Duffer Brothers.
5 "**Shock Jock**", directed by Frank Darabont.
6 "**Escape from Camazotz**", director and writer(s) TBA.
7 "**The Bridge**", director and writer(s) TBA.
8 "**The Rightside Up**", directed by the Duffer Brothers.

Fans took to social media in late January, posting pictures of the demolition of the long-standing Hawkins High building, telling people they had just days left to see the set. It is now almost entirely demolished. You can see for yourself via @thehawkinsreporter on Instagram.

Finn Wolfhard, speaking to *Collider*, said about the show ending: "It's definitely a long season. Not every episode is like a full-blown movie, but there are definitely some episodes this year that the runtime is definitely film-length. When all that adds up, I guess they are like micro-movies. But there are some episodes that are still 40 minutes, 45 mins."

Joe Keery, appearing on *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon, also talked about the last season. He said: "It's crazy, it was a long year. But to wrap it all up and the anticipation of working on something for so long – I mean it's been one-third of my life, really.

"It was emotional. We sort of got to that last day and it was like everything really hit on that last day of shooting."

Sadie Sink, also appearing on *The Tonight Show*, admitted to taking a number of

Gaten Matarazzo (Dustin) on set.

Winona Ryder goofs around with her younger pals.

items from the set. "I needed Max's skateboard, that was actually gifted to me. I've got some Walkmans, some Kate Bush cassettes and some Vans and stuff. I need to kind of be careful 'cause the house is slowly starting to look like a *Stranger Things* museum."

Stranger Things: The First Shadow has just had a second media night in London's West End, celebrating the new cast.

The stage show – a prequel to the series, which looks at the origins of Vecna – opens on Broadway, at the Marquis Theatre, with performances from 28 March. Visit strangerthingsonstage.com.

The cast of *Stranger Things* have a number of other productions coming soon. Millie Bobby Brown stars in *Electric State* (see page 50). Finn Wolfhard is in *The Legend Of Ochi*, releasing in April. Joe Keery will star in upcoming thriller *Cold Storage*, and Sadie Sink is in upcoming apocalyptic musical drama *O'Dessa*. David Harbour appears in *A Working Man* and *Thunderbolts**, while Jamie Campbell Bower appears in upcoming film *The Haunting In Wicker Park*.

Gaten Matarazzo, Caleb McLaughlin, Noah Schnapp and Finn Wolfhard attended PeopleCon's Stranger Fan Meet in Paris earlier this month. Speaking at the event they gave various teases about season five.

"There was one tiny thing that I kind of begged the Duffer Brothers to give me this year and they technically gave me what I wanted," Wolfhard said.

He also talked about their final table read, saying: "We were all crying pretty hard, I will say, and then Noah went the extra mile and cried a little bit more than everyone."

Speaking about the final scripts, he said: "I didn't know what was going to happen but I was surprised, definitely, at some of the stuff in it. I was surprised at how emotional I got, actually.

"I think we all walked into it being like, 'Oh yeah, we got this, none of us are going to be emotional at all' and by the end of it we were all just like on the floor basically. In the end it was, like, a really great positive experience."

Schnapp's favourite scene of the series is one from season five. He also noted: "I would say the hardest [scene to film] would be in the recent season, which I honestly can't talk about."

When asked to describe season five in three words he said: "Really sad, really sweet and really shocking."

Talking about filming his final scene, Schnapp said: "It was very sad. I was heartbroken. I was devastated. I was crying and it was really hard to say goodbye. I wouldn't say it was the best of days, but it was the perfect way to end, and you guys will be really happy with it."

Matarazzo added: "That last week of filming was definitely one of the harder weeks of my life."

McLaughlin said that season five has been his favourite to appear in and told fans: "It will answer a lot of questions and you'll be happy with the results. Or... you may not be happy with the results... We'll see!"

A new range of *Stranger Things* Valentine gifts were recently made available alongside the extensive tie-in merchandise at netflix.shop.

Following the Next On Netflix event, a promotional poster – featuring Eleven – was released. It prompted anyone who had seen her to call a number. When the number was called, fans were treated to a pre-recorded message:

"Thank you for contacting the Hawkins Police Department. Due to the recent 7.4 magnitude earthquake, Hawkins is currently under lockdown to ensure the safety of our residents.

"The Hawkins Emergency Task Force is working closely with Hawkins PD to track down missing persons, of which Jane Hopper is a priority. We urge you, as a responsible citizen of Hawkins, to assist us in our search to locate her." →

MISSING TEEN
Name:
JANE HOPPER
White Female
15 years old
DOB: 06/07/71
Height: 5'-4"
Last Seen:
Wearing a hooded jacket
walking alone in the vicinity of
Hawkins High School on
June 13, 1986
Reward for information leading to the location of missing child.
A reward totaling $3000.00 will be PAID for all leads which result in the location of Jane Hopper or her body. Last seen walking on the sidewalk near Hawkins High School where she mysteriously disappeared that afternoon, June 13, 1986. Contact the Hawkins Police Department if you have any information regarding the whereabouts of this person.
Call 765-303-2020

Stranger Things: The First Shadow on stage.

A HILL TO CLIMB

The Duffer Brothers presented a world-first look at footage from *Stranger Things* season five at the global Next On Netflix event last month – then took to the stage to talk about what to expect

The Duffers check out some new footage.

Jamie Campbell Bower as Vecna.

Ross: We spent a full year filming this season. By the end, we'd captured over 650 hours of footage. So, needless to say, this is our biggest and most ambitious season yet. It's like eight blockbuster movies. It's pretty insane.

Matt: At the same time, we think it's our most personal story. It was super-intense and emotional to film – for us and for our actors. We've been making this show together for almost 10 years. There was a lot of crying. There was *so* much crying. The show means so much to all of us, and everyone put their hearts and souls into it. And we hope – and believe – that passion will translate to the screen.

Matt: But while this might be the end of the story for Mike, Hopper, Dustin, Lucas, Eleven and the others, it's not goodbye for *Stranger Things*. There are many more stories to tell. You can find one of those stories right now on the West End – an Olivier-winning play called *Stranger Things: The First Shadow*, which is a prequel about Henry Creel before he became Vecna.

Ross: The play is directed by Stephen Daldry, who is a straight-up genius, along with Justin Martin, and it's written by Kate Trefry, a brilliant writer who has been working on our show since season two. They did an incredible job – it feels like a mega episode of the show unfolding live before your eyes. The stagecraft is groundbreaking. And in March, it's coming to Broadway, which is... really surreal and just a dream come true for all of us.

Matt: There are more *Stranger Things* stories to tell and in the works. It's a bit early at this point to talk about them, but we're deeply involved in every one. It's very important to us that anything with the *Stranger Things* name on it is of the highest quality and not repetitive – that it has a reason to exist and always blazes its own path. And also, it needs to basically just be... awesome. Or we need to think it's awesome. And there are a lot of what we think are awesome things in the pipeline.

Ross: But our world doesn't just revolve around *Stranger Things*. In 2026, we're executive-producing two new shows through our company, Upside Down Pictures. We have *The Boroughs* and *Something Very Bad Is Going To Happen*.

Both shows encompass what we feel is at the core of *Stranger Things* and that is they're stories about ordinary people who encounter the extraordinary. They play in a genre sandbox, but they're always grounded in a reality that audiences can relate to.

Matt: Of the two projects, *The Boroughs* probably shares the most DNA with *Stranger Things* because it's about a group of misfits who fight an otherworldly evil. Only unlike *Stranger Things*, it's set in a retirement community, so that's something different. This time our misfits are a little on the older side. They ride golf carts, not bikes. It stars Alfred Molina, Geena Davis, Alfre Woodard, Bill Pullman and a host of other screen icons who we're obsessed with. We've seen the first three episodes, and we're really pumped about it. It's fun, scary and touching too, and we can't wait for you to see it.

Ross: Then there's *Something Very Bad Is Going to Happen*, a series that follows a bride and groom in a chaotic, anxiety-filled week leading up to their wedding. It dives into the horror and dread that often comes with making a lifelong commitment to someone – something that anyone who's ever been in a relationship can definitely relate to. We don't want to say too much more about the story yet, but the title is accurate. Bad things *do* happen.

Matt: The show's written by Haley Z Boston. This is her first show, and she is a major new talent, we think, as are the stars of the show – Camila Morrone and Adam DiMarco – and the director, Weronika Tofilska, who recently directed a little show you may have heard of called *Baby Reindeer*. You should check it out.

Ross: All of this to say: we're gonna be hanging around at Netflix, which has been our home for the past 10 years. We couldn't ask for better partners. If you want to tell original stories like we do, this is really the place to be.

Back in the stage show, things are hotting up.

STOCK IMAGES: UMER IQBAL/GETTY

The teaser for season five shown at the Next On Netflix event has, at the time of going to press, not been made available online.

It featured a recovered Vecna, Max running through the Void, Hopper with a shotgun, Demodogs, Dustin in a new cap – get ready for the merch – Linda Hamilton in what appears to be a military uniform, a stained glass window at the Creel house and Eleven in oversized clothing.

Mike is heard telling Eleven that they'll finish this fight together. A voiceover from Eleven says: "They don't get to write the ending – but we do."

Toy company Jazware has secured a global deal with Netflix to release a new range of *Stranger Things* merchandise.

These include action figures, playsets and environmental sets in varying styles and scales, alongside toy vehicles and plush options.

There will also be ranges of costumes and accessories encompassing everything from Halloween to cosplay, alongside pet toys, clothing and accessories.

Jazware has already released several characters in their Squishmallows x *Stranger Things* collaboration, ranging from 3.5 to 10 inches in size. Additional characters will be added to the line soon.

Despite the Duffer Brothers saying it was "too early" to talk about spin-offs, one was announced in 2023.

The *Stranger Things* animated series will be produced by the Duffers, alongside Eric Robles's Flying Bark Productions as well as Shawn Levy and Dan Cohen's 21 Laps production team.

The Duffers said: "We've always dreamed of an animated *Stranger Things* in the vein of the Saturday morning cartoons that we grew up loving, and to see this dream realised has been absolutely thrilling."

They added that they were "blown away" by what they've seen, adding, "the scripts and artwork are incredible, and we can't wait to share more with you! The adventure continues..."

"It's either egg or cheese, I reckon. Looks fine."

Millie Bobby Brown and a Duffer share a moment.

It's all smiles as filming finally comes to an end.

There are a number of official *Stranger Things* books due for release in July and September this year – perhaps giving fans a hint at when to expect to see their favourite show return.

Stranger Things Season 1: The Junior Novelization and *Stranger Things: Hawkins ABCs (Funko Pop!) Little Golden Book* are published on 8 July.

The Little Guide To Stranger Things, by Orange Hippo, is due on 11 September, with graphic novel *Stranger Things And Dungeons & Dragons: The Rise of Hellfire* out on 30 September.

Finally, *Stranger Things: The Official Cookbook: Recipes From Hawkins And Beyond* is scheduled for 3 February 2026.

For more information you can visit readstrangerthings.com.

The Duffer Brothers spoke to *Variety* and confirmed that most of their year will be spent in post-production on season five. "Right now, we're just cutting all the visual effects sequences for the show so they can get started on those, so that they can be running in time for a release," Matt said.

When asked for an indication of when the series will be released, Matt said: "A lot of it hasn't been decided, in terms of exactly the release dates and cadence. That's one reason I'm not allowed to talk about it. We're getting on a call in about a couple weeks about it. I just know it was very important for us and Netflix that we get it out this year. But even that is quite the push."

This led to much speculation – and even some reporting as fact – that season five will not air in 2025, which simply isn't true. Speaking days later at SCAD TVfest, they confirmed the series *will* air in 2025, just not soon. Editing is ahead of schedule and they confirmed they'd actually filmed *more* than 650 hours. They also mentioned season five will include flashback sequences from an early season.

The Duffer Brothers also elaborated on their plans for spin-offs. Speaking at SCAD TVfest Matt said: "This story, these characters' stories, that's done. That whole story is coming to an end. There's not like a Steve/Dustin spin-off or something like that. The hope is that we finish telling this story. And then you leave it and tell new stories. And hopefully, there are new characters that people can fall in love with."

When the Duffer Brothers were asked if they were looking to repeat the success of "Running Up That Hill" by Kate Bush, Matt said: "You can't really manufacture it. If you try to manufacture it, you're almost guaranteed for it to not hit."

Fancy your very own Jim Hopper action figure?

Threezero has announced the latest in its line of 1/6 scale figures. The season one Jim Hopper has 35 points of articulation, comes with an array of accessories, and is available to pre-order now from sideshow.com

Stranger Things is on Netflix. Look for updates in every issue of SFX this year.

ON SET PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW COOPER, CLAY ENOS, ATSUSHI NISHIJIMA, NIKO TAVERNISE. STRANGER THINGS: FIRST SHADOW PICTURES BY MANUEL HARLAN. VECNA PORTRAIT: STEVE DIETL. ALL PICTURES © NETFLIX/ ROSS DUFFER (@ROSSDUFFER).

DESIGNING STAR TREK: SECTION 31

GERSHA PHILLIPS, COSTUME DESIGNER ON *STAR TREK: DISCOVERY*, *STRANGE NEW WORLDS* AND *STARFLEET ACADEMY*, DISCUSSES THE LOOKS OF THE LATEST *TREK* MOVIE WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

DESIGNING FOR THE FUTURE

On *Discovery* I used specific brands as inspiration, people that were doing futuristic looks, and also the way they construct. Iris van Herpen is phenomenal in terms of her otherworldly looks, which are really quite fabulous. We actually got her to send her stuff and she invited me to her shows in Paris. Just seeing them in person is even more magical than seeing them when you look at them online. Another designer that I used a lot – and a lot of people that do sci-fi use them, because I can always see them in other peoples' costumes – is Gareth Pugh. Alexander McQueen, especially. There's some Sarah Barton, obviously. We did a lot of Rick Owens; Michelle wore a lot of Rick Owens in *Discovery*. Schiaparelli, as well, does some pretty fabulous pieces, Viktor & Rolf sometimes too.

We were doing Vulcans and Klingons and things like that, so we were taking things like conquistadors and mixing it with Alexander McQueen, and doing a mash up that creates something that looks futuristic.

For me, the markers for futuristic, I always said were sleek, something unexpected. What we tried to do was create characters for different species. The biggest thing about the future is always trying to push the look forward, take whatever you're seeing of the most extravagant, futuristic looks that are on the runway and online.

PHILIPPA GEORGIOU
THE BARAAM LOOKS

Michelle [Yeoh] pitched me the Balenciaga idea because she's an ambassador. She wanted them to be involved and I thought, "Well, that's a pretty great idea," because I know I had used Balenciaga for inspiration in the past for *Discovery* for her, so it didn't feel like a stretch for me to do that.

The other thing that she mentioned was that she wanted to be completely different from the character that we had already established, the Emperor Georgiou character. The word she used was actually butterfly – she wanted to look like a butterfly. That's where we went into these purpley iridescent things.

Colour became a thing, and I was looking at different things that felt butterfly-esque and also colourful, in a way that felt like it wasn't too departed from Georgiou, but it still was different enough that you felt that this was not the same person exactly. The idea that she had evolved, and she was a little different. With Balenciaga, I went through their archives. I pulled images of all the things I liked from there, then I mixed that with things that I had illustrated. The first thing they sent back, I was like, "No, that's not going to work." It was too much fabric, too overwhelming. Because the other mandate actually came from Olatunde [Osunsanmi, director] – he wanted her to have a cape that would come off during the fight. They wanted to use the costume as a

IMAGES: PARAMOUNT, CBS. STOCK IMAGES: NAOKIKIM, GEENGRAPHY

The phase pod Georgiou places on the weapon.

weapon, so that when she lashes out, it can injure. The last piece was the choker coming off and being a dagger. So a few things to incorporate that were a little challenging!

The final dress was something that they had in black, and they had another dress that they had done for Beyoncé for her tour – it was a strapless version and the same large beads. We married these two dresses together, which was this cape dress that I think Nicole Kidman wore as a closing look in one of their fashion shows, and then the beads. So that's how we came up with that final dress. I actually would have loved it as the first dress, but because of the fighting sequences and everything, there was just no way. The dress is so heavy and movement in it is so limited. It's very difficult to do a lot of things in it.

Balenciaga gave us these really pointy shoes that Michelle couldn't wear, so we had to redo a boot. We got I think it was a Gucci boot, and we asked them to send us extra fabric. So we covered the boot in the same fabric as the legging, so it looks like it's one piece when she steps down the stairs when we first see her. Things like that, we had to incorporate and change around.

PHILIPPA GEORGIOU ▲
SECTION 31 LOOK

We leaned back into her Emperor Georgiou in *Discovery* from season three – the slim, sleek black leather looks. We just updated it. It was a little bit more feminine in terms of the way it fitted her, and it was a little less hard. The coat's pretty severe with the shoulders, but it's sort of her battle gear, so it should have that vibe about it.

We knew we wanted to do that long coat, that's why we put those slits in it. I'd done that quite a bit, even in *Discovery*, where I just opened the coat up so that it had movement. Also, Olatunde really loves when things have movement and fly around, like that *Matrix*-y vibe.

RACHEL GARRETT
SECTION 31

The idea of her *Section 31* look is that it's supposed to feel a little bit Starfleet, so that's why it was blue. Her chest plate piece is reminiscent of something we did for *Discovery*, so there's elements of it that are there. Her pants feel uniformy, her boots, everything had a little bit of that vibe to it.

RACHEL GARRETT
THE BARAAM LOOKS

With her disguise looks, the idea is to make her look as different as possible. Somebody was saying that they didn't even recognise that was the same character, which I thought was really great. I guess we really did a good job with this.

Kacey [Rohl] has got such a great body to dress – she wears anything very well and was totally game to have fun and go the distance. I love her two dresses. I feel like we didn't see them enough to really get the vibe from them. They were different things that I found that I liked and reworked, and pushed it forward, with fabric and stuff like that.

Her final dress was actually an Alexander McQueen homage to a dress that Sarah Burton had done, I think maybe in her last or second last collection.

We actually made our own print – we took a galaxy sky image and worked that with the spiral over top, and then had it printed on fabric, on this really great material called liquid silk. So it has this really cool, iridescenty feel, with a really great personality.

ALOK

He's the darkest and the most severe and the cleanest. His look was more about bringing a little bit of his character, knowing that he was from a different time, and trying to lean back into that and bring it forward somehow, so that there's a little bit of those elements in his costumes.

MELLE

Her dress was another that, obviously, she had to be able to move in. She was also supposed to be super, super sexy – the idea is that when people look at her, she can draw them in. I had a few different vibes of dresses that I chose, and that one also was another kind of liquid metal, so it looks stunning. But it is the most difficult fabric to work with, the worst, because the little pieces, the filaments, when you cut the fabric you have to bind them so they don't all fall out, because they just start to unravel and fall out of the bottom.

We had to work with the fabric in a certain direction so it looks good on the body. We fitted the dress, it was all great and fantastic, and we were about to start beading, and then they had a whole hair fiasco. The first bald cap didn't work. So that's why she has that collar – we had to add it as a secondary thing to help hide it, because her hair actually is down her back under the bald cap.

So we had to redo the dress – it was just a nightmare, I have to say. The material is tricky enough, and then when you put Swarovski on something, it changes the way it fits right away. It was just problem after problem after problem that we kept having to solve to get it to look really great on her. Then obviously we had to make a double for fighting and everything was just crazy. It was such a crazy journey.

FUZZ

[I was] trying to create looks and silhouettes that looked different and also individual to the persons that they were. So with Fuzz, we gave him this chest pack with his guns in the front of him, so they were always available and ready.

His first look was something that I showed Alex [Kurtzman, executive producer] and Olatunde – I was actually quite shocked that they picked it, it had these crazy wide leg pants. We actually printed on top of fabric to give it a little bit more texture and also leaning into Fuzz and what he would pick, because he's a Nanokin, so his tastes are going to be a little bit different. I'm gonna say bug-like, coming from the insect world. I wanted his stuff to have that little extra layer of stuff on it.

Because he's a little bit flamboyant and extra, we added the chains and the extra jewellery, he had great rings and all of those things. So he was always flashy. I'm going to say he was the dandy of the guys.

Quasi's stun stick. It's not a fun stick.

QUASI

He also had a bit of a dandified look as well. We leaned into a little bit of the past for him, mixing almost Edwardian, say, with contemporary, doing a mash-up. So it's taking that and bringing it forward and adding these other silhouettes. The first thing he wears is very long, and it has almost an Edwardian frock coat feel, but then with the asymmetric way of closing the jacket. I do think he was dandy, too, but less flashy, more reserved.

Unfortunately, San also has a phase pod!

Darien Mask A1

THE INTRUDER

I did something very different, because the way he was described in the script was that he was wearing a balaclava-like mask. So I did something soft and more in that vein and got notes back that they wanted him to be more armoured. I got a picture of something from a Guillermo del Toro movie, a character who wears a mask. They said, "Can you lean into this?" My illustrator did a whole bunch of different versions that we sent out, they narrowed it down. We went on a journey where they wanted it to be more armoured. So then we created a whole armour piece for him.

Again, we had to take into consideration the nature of the fight, so we built it similar to how we do our spacesuits, where they're in three pieces. A vest that goes over a tunic top, then the pants, so that it's all separate pieces that can move, and then it allows the bending.

Star Trek: Section 31 is on Paramount+.

PICTURES: RANK FILM DISTRIBUTORS, STOCK IMAGES: ISAAC74, RICHARD NEWSTEAD/GETTY

MIND THE DOORS!

OVER FIFTY YEARS AFTER ITS RELEASE, LONDON UNDERGROUND HORROR DEATH LINE STILL RETAINS ITS CHILLING POWER. DIRECTOR GARY SHERMAN SHEDS LIGHT ON HIS CANNIBALISTIC DEBUT

WORDS: **OLIVER PFEIFFER**

IN 1892, LONDON UNDERGROUND tunnel diggers were trapped in a cave-in between Russell Square and the now-defunct British Museum stop. The subway company went bankrupt, so it sent no rescue team. Eighty years later, two troglodyte descendants of those trapped workers are hungering for raw meat...

The unsettling backstory to Gary Sherman's brutal 1972 directorial debut *Death Line* (aka *Raw Meat* in the US) is enough to give daily Tube commuters the heebie-jeebies. Perhaps even more disturbing is how much of this urban legend was plucked from reality.

"I created the backstory loosely based on some actual events, combining it with an ancient cannibal story," Gary Sherman tells *SFX*. "I had been doing a lot of research on the history of the tube and reading about a 16th century clan in Scotland – highwaymen were forced to eat their victims because they were so notorious, they couldn't show their faces anywhere.

"It occurred to me that combining those two stories and overlaying political commentary of the rampant racism, classism, and all the other evil 'isms' that existed in British society was possible. And if I made it horrible enough, no one, except the most astute, would realise how political the piece was."

Sherman's longtime writer-producer friend Jonathan Demme (who would notably go on to →

It takes a lot of work to make things look this bad.

direct the equally cannibalistic *The Silence Of The Lambs*) brought the script to the attention of American producer Paul Maslansky. He gave it to future 20th Century Fox Studios's president Alan Ladd Jr and his associate, Jay Kanter.

"They were enthusiastic from the start and incredibly supportive," Maslansky told *SFX*, speaking before his death in December. "We put the crew and locations together in about three weeks. The hours were long, the locations difficult and unpleasant, but we finished every day with optimism, and the London crews were fantastic."

"They read it, got what it was all about, loved it, trusted me to make it, and gave me a total free hand," continues Sherman. "I brought in Ceri Jones to write it with me because I wanted a comedy element and needed a British writer with a great sense of humour."

Horror veteran Donald Pleasence brought that humour to life in the stand-out role of the sarcastic, continuously tea-drinking Inspector Calhoun, tasked with investigating the strange disappearance of a high-ranking MP in the bowels of the London Underground. Pleasence clearly enjoys delivering cheeky put-downs to every character he encounters and, in one scene, notably shares a heated head-to-head with horror icon Christopher Lee in a cameo role as an intimidating MI5 boss.

"Donald was a joy, a consummate professional, and the nicest person anyone could ever imagine working with," continues Sherman. "He loved the part. Ceri and I were so proud to hear our words coming out of his mouth. He and Norman Rossington [playing his sidekick, Detective Sergeant Rogers] did test me a bit the first few days, but I guess I passed the test because once I did, we were a team."

METHOD TO THE MADNESS

Screen legend Marlon Brando was initially sought for the pivotal carnivorous role of the primitive, nameless "Man" who, riddled by malnutrition, feeds off London Underground commuters to survive. "[His agent] Jay Kanter told me that Marlon had always wanted to play a role where he had so much make-up on no one would recognise him," reveals Sherman.

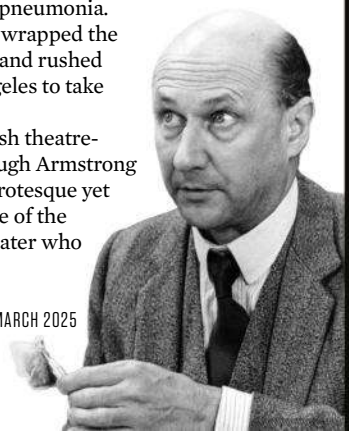
"He was filming *Last Tango In Paris* with Bertolucci. Jay called him and sent him the script. He said yes, but just before he was to come to London, his son Christian became deathly ill with pneumonia. Marlon quickly wrapped the filming in Paris and rushed back to Los Angeles to take care of his son."

Instead, British theatre-trained actor Hugh Armstrong embodied the grotesque yet sympathetic role of the tortured flesh-eater who tries in vain to keep his dying pregnant partner alive. "Hugh had no problem with being a second choice to Brando," the director continues. "Hugh and I spent many hours at the great ape house at Regent's Park Zoo watching gorillas and chimpanzees.

"We had hours and hours of discussions about the character. In retrospect, I am grateful that Hugh played the part rather than Brando. Had Brando done it, it would have been a Marlon Brando film rather than standing on its own two legs."

Armstrong gives a compelling performance as the filthy, boil-faced cannibal who resides in the derelict tunnels of the Underground and hauntingly repeats the line "Mind the doors!" (mimicking the safety announcement) in a frustrated bid to communicate with the outside world.

The confined, claustrophobic setting of the London Underground and its abandoned tunnels was authentically captured by British director of photography Alex Thomson, who would go on to shoot such striking films as *Excalibur*, *Legend*, *Labyrinth* and *Alien 3*.



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UNDERGROUND BEATS

Death Line opens in London's seedy Soho and features a funky score by British musician, producer and one-time film composer Wil Malone.

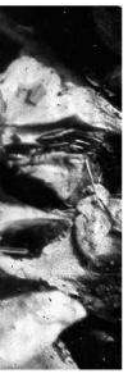
Restricted by a miniscule budget, Malone chose a Moog synthesiser to compose the unforgettably pounding cacophonous theme that starts the film. We follow a respected MP (James Cossins) leaving a strip joint and making his way to the bowels of the London Underground, where he is ultimately attacked and taken by the "Man".

Starting off as a member of '60s experimental band Orange Bicycle, Malone would go on to produce albums for bands such as Black Sabbath, The Verve and Massive Attack – notably arranging and conducting the strings on the latter's 1991 hit "Unfinished Sympathy".

> **"Donald Pleasence was the nicest person anyone could ever imagine working with"**

David Ladd and Sharon Gurney played the couple.

"Man" (Hugh Armstrong) attends to his partner.



Look, a Man is just trying to make ends meat.

Particularly impressive is an uninterrupted seven-minute tracking shot of the cannibal's gruesome lair. The sequence takes in the rotting, maggot-infested remains of his victims and his dying partner before regressing through tunnels to hear the audio history of the collapsing tunnellers and finally tilting above to modern-day commuters on the platform.

"Alex Thomson was one of the most brilliant cinematographers I had ever had the pleasure of working with," continues Sherman. "He and I had done dozens of commercials together. And, of course, the fact that he had shot many award-winning features didn't hurt."

Nevertheless, despite such pedigree talent, filming in the often disgusting bowels of the London Underground was challenging, to say the least. "It was awful working down there! It was cold, damp, dirty and rat-infested. It was also initially filled with human faeces and urine," says Sherman. "Of course, we sent cleaning crews in ahead of us, but the stench was still there. The dailies made up for the hardships, and we were so excited about what we were getting that the dank environment just disappeared."

When it was released in September 1972, the film received an intriguing critical reception. Some criticised the lacklustre performance of David Ladd (Alan's paternal half-brother) in one of the lead roles, and the implausibility of the story, while others celebrated its gruesome terror and clever commentary on the class divide while praising Armstrong's moving portrayal.

"The strange thing was that most of the lower-end newspapers gave us the worst reviews, but the *Financial Times*, *The Times* and the British Film Institute gave us raves," says Sherman. "Robin Wood, probably one of the most influential critics at that time, was our hero. I will never be able to thank him enough for championing *Death Line*."

Due to the initial mixed reception, the film was initially placed on the second half of a double bill by its US distributors (where it was edited to avoid an X rating and retitled *Raw Meat*) with Ivan Reitman's horror-comedy *Cannibal Girls*.

"However, by the second or third day of its release, they dropped the other picture and were running *Death Line* back-to-back," continues Sherman. "The audience was our final arbiter. What can I say? Fifty-three years later, they're still watching *Death Line*. How many other pictures have had that longevity?"

The director would go on to make notable genre films like undead "video nasty" *Dead & Buried*, exploitation crime thriller *Vice Squad*, and the sadly ill-fated sequel *Poltergeist III* before directing an episode of the largely unconnected '90s *Poltergeist* TV series.

However, his gritty, London-shot debut – a grim precursor to Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* – arguably left the most significant impact. "*Death Line* was my firstborn, and I'm very proud of my baby," he says.

Death Line is available on Blu-ray.

UNDERGROUND HORRORS

***Death Line* isn't the only horror film to use the claustrophobic confines of the London Underground to unsettling effect**

Quatermass And The Pit (1967)
Hammer Studios' third and final Nigel Kneale adaptation is inventive and genuinely gripping. It centres on the shocking discovery and subsequent consequences of an ancient alien artefact by workers on a London Underground extension. It would later have a notable impact on Tobe Hooper's science fiction horror *Lifeforce*.

An American Werewolf In London (1981)
Over 40 years on, the unforgettable sequence in which the largely unseen titular predator slowly hunts a sole commuter through the empty tunnels and escalators of Tottenham Court Road Station remains a terrifying highlight of John Landis's revered horror comedy.

Creep (2004)
Christopher Smith set the proceedings of his relentless horror debut entirely in the increasingly uncomfortable confines of the London subway. Owing more than a passing debt to *Death Line* (though Smith said the Underground sequence in Landis's film inspired him), *Creep* similarly takes its heroine through forgotten derelict tunnels and spooky hideouts, where an unseen predator stalks her to, er, creepy effect.

28 Weeks Later (2007)
Juan Carlos Fresnadillo's intensely atmospheric sequel to Danny Boyle's classic re-entered that horrific post-apocalyptic world with a new take on the enraged Infected. It features a memorably intense London Underground encounter in the dark, where Robert Carlyle's infected father has a showdown with his terrified kids.

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Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

JAMES ALISTAIR HENRY

Novel approach: the sitcom writer tells us why he's moved into books

Words by Jonathan Wright

ALTHOUGH MANY PEOPLE FROM elsewhere in the UK refuse to acknowledge the fact, Cornwall is a nation distinct from the rest of the country. Just ask novelist James Alistair Henry, who as a child moved from Blackpool to the land where people put jam on a scone ahead of the cream. "Cornwall is just not England," he says. "I mean, I know technically it is England, but if you say something [there] about Cornish people being English, you'll get a sharp intake of breath – and rightly so."

Joking aside, this idea of living somewhere with its own distinct sense of place is of course by no means unique to Cornwall in the British Isles. As he got older and moved first to Derby and then to Kent, Henry began not just to notice the obvious cultural differences between different parts of the UK, but to become fascinated by the way these were rooted in historical events, such as when the Saxons pushed (at the considerable risk of generalising) "contemplative, quiet Celts" west, into Wales and Cornwall.

But what if these different cultures and nations had never been shoehorned together? What if Britain had never built an empire – or been the first country in the world to industrialise? Most crucially, what if 1066 and all that had never happened? These are the questions that lie at the centre of alternate history police procedural *Pagans*.

"In this world, Britain's never been a player," says Henry of the timeline he created for the book, which takes place against the background of a Unification Summit that's supposed to bring together Britain's different tribes: Vikings, Saxons and Celts whose societies were never disrupted by the Norman conquest and William's land-grabbing retinue of chancer lords. "The class system is subtly different, which I think is really interesting," adds Henry. "This idea there isn't quite an upper class in the way that we've had for hundreds of years."

WHERE THE WIND BLOWS

At first, Henry thought the novel would be a fantasy "where all the dragons and zombies have been pushed to the edges" but people have "laptops and cars". This was "fun to write for about 10,000 words" but "the plot wasn't there". And so things might have rested but for Henry's love of Scandi noir. Having moved beyond entry-level hits such as *The Bridge* and *The Killing*, Henry was getting his fix by watching a series called *Deadwind*. It was snowy and icy, and people spoke in Scandinavian accents.

"I thought, 'I don't actually know what country this is,'" he remembers. "I was even thinking, 'Is this a made-up country?'" He wouldn't have been entirely surprised, he jokes, had the series been "tricking" him so that dragons suddenly appeared.

As it happens, *Deadwind* featured no mythical creatures and was set in Finland, but Henry's doubts over what he was watching helped unlock *Pagans*. "My thought was, 'If people aren't into the alternate history, that's absolutely fine because you could just follow the plot, and hopefully the plot will make sense as a proper police procedural.'"

It does indeed, right down to having odd-couple coppers: Captain Aedith Mercia, pragmatic daughter of a powerful Saxon leader, and (in the role of mystical maverick) Celtic Tribal Detective Inspector Drustan. "You've got to have two mismatched cops tracking a ritualistic serial killer and the crime turns out to have links to one of the characters," says Henry. "That's how Nordic noirs normally work."

BIODATA

From
Born in Blackpool, raised in Cornwall.

Greatest Hits
As well as such TV hits as *Green Wing*, *Campus* and *Piglets*, Henry has worked in radio, creating the comedy show *Wosson Cornwall* (2023) for Radio 4.

Random Fact
Having done an online showrunning course with his friend Matthew Graham, Henry doesn't think it's for him. "I'm not set up for arguing all the time..."

THE KING OF COMEDY

He knows of what he speaks, because Henry's background is in writing for television. After university he decided to become a scriptwriter. "I thought, 'Well, if I'm not making a living as a scriptwriter within a year, I have failed," he says. "Then within the year, I was like, 'Oh, I failed.'"

He moved to Canterbury, where a succession of "crap jobs" gave way to working in Waterstones. He started hosting Q&As with writers, which he loved. At the turn of the millennium, Henry won a Channel 4 sitcom-writing competition. He was on his way. Via work on *Bob The Builder* and *Smack The Pony*, he landed a spot on the team writing cult medical sitcom *Green Wing*.

For a while, he carried on working part-time in the book trade, until this became impossible. "At one point, there was a queue building up, and I was in the back room having a conversation with my agent on the phone," he recalls. "I thought, 'This is not very responsible, I should probably just commit to writing.'"

Henry's still working in TV, most recently with *Green Wing* alumni on *Piglets*. He now lives in Cornwall again with his wife (a tech-sector copywriter) and children. "We thought, 'We're gonna have kids, I'd rather have cute Cornish kids than terrifying London kids." As for why he's moved into novels, that's partly because the pandemic gave him the time and space to switch to books.

Besides, Henry's always written "too novelistically" for television, like the time his *Green Wing* script called for Stephen Mangan's Dr Guy Secretan to blush to order. "Mangan went, 'Look, I'm really good, but I'm not *that* fucking good!'"

Pagans is out on 27 February, from Moonflower Books.

> “You’ve got to have two mismatched cops tracking a ritualistic serial killer”

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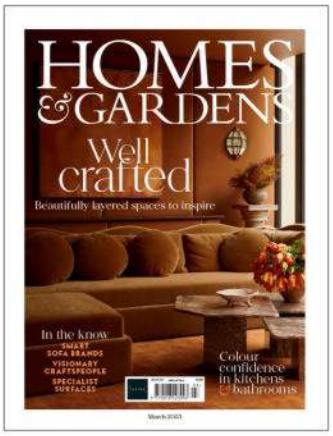

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SCAN ME

WALLPAPER IN BACKGROUND GRANDIFLORA ROSE, DESIGNERS GUILD
PHOTOGRAPHS (BACKGROUND) POLLY WREFORD

MARCH 2025

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edited by Ian Berriman

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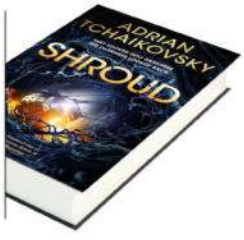
→ It's a case of love across the divide as two snipers guard a mysterious gateway to Hull. Sorry, *Hell*.



86 SHROUD

→ The ever-prolific Adrian Tchaikovsky takes us to a pitch-black moon deadly to human life.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE

"Damned glasses... is that Red Hulk, or just Hulk?"

CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD

Human Shield

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 118 minutes

Director **Julius Onah**

Cast **Anthony Mackie, Danny Ramirez, Shira Haas, Harrison Ford**

Tasked with not only proving that Marvel can get back on track following the stumbles of 2023 (in part due to creeping superhero fatigue) and can do so without the audience-boosting laughs, self-referential nods and cameo power that *Deadpool & Wolverine* could deploy, this latest Captain America outing finds itself a little too overburdened to land as smoothly as it might.

Anthony Mackie's Sam Wilson remains a charismatic character, and his take on the Cap mantle is different in attitude and action to Steve Rogers, but around him, *Brave New World* as a film is trying so hard to ape *The Winter Soldier* that it can't help but look inferior by comparison.

We're also back in homework territory, because as much as the film wants to fill us in seamlessly with the required information on movies past (and future elements, in one case literally), it ends up with people becoming walking exposition delivery systems.

There are so many scenes of someone discovering exactly the right file they need to explain the next plot turn that it becomes near-parody. The story of Wilson trying to work once more with Thunderbolt Ross (Harrison Ford, replacing the late William Hurt), who has now ascended to the White House, has to catch us up with the likes of *The Incredible Hulk*, more than one Avengers movie, and even *Eternals* (yes, it hasn't entirely been forgotten).

> **"This is a film without satisfying villainy"**

This is also a film without satisfying villainy. Giancarlo Esposito hams it up early on in a nothing mercenary role, and poor Tim Blake Nelson is mostly reduced to spouting vengeful clichés as Samuel Sterns, while looking for all the world as if Toad from Fox's *X-Men* films had a accident with a popcorn machine.

Ford fares better, giving good gruff attitude as Ross, with appropriate layers of bitterness and regret. Of course, once he gets angry all acting bets are off, as Red Hulk reduces the film's finale to yet another CG-heavy punch-fest.

Director Julius Onah (of *The Cloverfield Paradox* and the far superior *Luce*) feels submerged here, lost in a world of murky visuals and, even with some of the best stunt teams in cinema at hand, unable to put together many memorable melees.

All is not lost, though. In the connection between Sam, his new Falcon sidekick Joaquim Torres (Danny Ramirez) and imprisoned former super-soldier Isaiah Bradley (Carl Lumbly) – both introduced in Disney+ series *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier* – there is humanity and humour, sorely needed amongst the VFX. Sam's concerns about how he's perceived also make for a welcome grace note. It may not soar, then, but the latest MCU effort flies right enough to make this a more promising sign for the future.

James White

i Anthony Mackie and Harrison Ford bonded over a shared love of woodwork, with Ford giving Mackie tips on routers.

THE PEOPLE'S JOKER

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
See bit.ly/peoplesjoker for details
15 | 92 minutes
Director **Vera Drew**
Cast **Vera Drew, Kane Distler, Lynn Downey, Nathan Faustyn**

It's a miracle that comedian Vera Drew's "indie Batman queer coming of age film" exists, and even more so that it's available for audiences to watch given its use of characters owned by DC. Clearly "Fair Use" and a lengthy disclaimer can go a long way.

Drew (who directs and also co-wrote the film) stars as Joker the Harlequin, a struggling anti-comedian battling depression and gender dysphoria in an even-more-dystopian version of Gotham watched over by a hardline Batman. Unexpected hope comes in the form of fellow stand-up Jason Todd/Mr J (Kane Distler, styled as Jared Leto's Joker from 2016's *Suicide Squad*). The two strike up a relationship, but J's past connections to Batman threaten to pull them apart.

A patchwork of disparate animated sequences and live action filmed on greenscreen in just a few days, *The People's Joker* lands somewhere between outsider auteur Neil Breen's visionary amateurism and a heartfelt examination of Drew's life and transition.

It's pretty much the definition of "not for everyone" – the film's garish aesthetic, especially, will be a major hurdle for some. Those who connect with it, though, will likely have found their new favourite film. **Will Salmon**

FLOW

Water World

★★★★☆

RELEASED 21 MARCH
U | 85 minutes
Director **Gints Zilbalodis**

This CG-animated indie film, created by Latvian animator Gints Zilbalodis, received a publicity boost recently when it was nominated for two Oscars: Best Animated Feature and Best International Feature Film.

It's a flood myth without humans or words. The hero is a black cat with wide yellow eyes which convey curiosity and fear in equal measure. At first its home is a verdant green landscape with man-made structures but no people. Then a flood comes, the water rises remorselessly, and the cat must take refuge on a small sailboat, together with an amiable capybara.

Soon there are more voyagers: a lemur super-hoarder with its basket of trinkets, an amusingly lunkheaded Labrador, a selfless crane that might be a saint. Absent of dialogue or voice-overs, the fascination of the film is in how well its story is told through the animals' terrifically readable expressions and behaviour. One marvellous scene shows them having an argument that escalates disastrously. Also contributing is the music, by Zilbalodis and Rihards Zaļupe, evocative without being manipulative.

> **"It's motored by suggestions rather than slogans"**

The bright, atmospheric visuals immerse us, though gamers may find the film's world distractingly close to an RPG environment. After the captivating opening, there are some slack moments, and the final pay-off isn't fully satisfying.

But it's a stimulating journey, motored by suggestions rather than slogans, and provides a counterpoint to DreamWorks' mega-hit *The Wild Robot*, which had a broadly similar ecological ethos but insisted on having its animals talking – sometimes far too much.

Andrew Osmond

i Director Gints Zilbalodis previously made a similarly-themed animated short called "Aqua". Watch it at bit.ly/aquashort.

DOG MAN

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
U | 89 minutes
Director **Peter Hastings**
Cast **Pete Davidson, Isla Fisher, Lil Rel Howery, Peter Hastings**

The brains behind the *Captain Underpants* franchise take a welcome leap into the world of *Dog Man*, its graphic novel spin-off, in this enjoyably nutty adventure.

Dog Man is a police officer who ends up with a man's body and a dog's head after an accident. Like a furry RoboCop, this law-enforcement hybrid lives to solve crimes; unlike RoboCop, he also enjoys fetching balls. His nemesis is evil cat Petey (Pete Davidson), a ginger puss who has all sorts of wicked schemes on the go, including cloning a baby version of himself (voiced by Lucas Hopkins Calderon) and trying to reanimate a psychotic dead fish named Flippy (voiced by Ricky Gervais).

As dog chases cat, the result is ferocious, unceasing silliness. With such frenetic pacing, the film is clearly aimed at pre-teens – but adults aren't forgotten. A cheeky quote from *Aliens* is a joyous highlight, although a character having a gerbil named "Colonel Kurtz", of all things, comes a close second.

Not since *The Mitchells vs The Machines* has an animated movie's gag hit-rate been so relentless. And while the animation looks simplistic at first glance, there are nuances that will reward multiple viewings. Thanks to the printed source material, there's real depth to this world... even if it is barking mad.

Jayne Nelson

THE MONKEY

Toy's Gory

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 95 minutes

Director **Osgood Perkins**

Cast **Theo James, Tatiana Maslany, Colin O'Brien, Elijah Wood**

First published in 1980, the Stephen King short story that inspired Osgood Perkins's latest film uses the pitiless malevolence of a cymbal-bashing toy ape to evoke a chilling atmosphere of creeping dread.

A lot of that carries over to Perkins's adaptation-cum-expansion, though it is largely superseded by grisly, grotesque silliness, in a manic follow-up to the director's 2024 horror hit *Longlegs* that needs no invitation to go bananas.

A wacky mash-up of the *Final Destination* franchise and such evil toy tales as *Child's Play* and *Annabelle*, this story of a now drum-banging toy monkey that only needs to be wound into action for someone to die horrifically strings together an elaborate series of kills for the audience's titillation and amusement.

Balk at the sadism if you will, yet there's a real élan to this cavalcade of calamity that makes for a deliriously demented treat – albeit one that can't hope to match the spine-tingling discomfiture and outrageous Nicolas Caginess of Perkins's previous journey to the dark side.

Introduced early doors as an unwanted curio that pilot Adam Scott can't wait to offload on an unsuspecting seller of antiques, the key-operated simian around which the plot revolves eventually winds up in the hands of his twin sons: cocksure bully Bill (Christian Convery) and his slight, bespectacled sibling Hal (also Convery). One slain babysitter and a brace of offed relations later, they twig that it's bad news and drop it down a well – though not before it has sown a seed of enmity that yields a quarter-century of fraternal estrangement.

Twenty-five years later, sadsack Hal (Theo James) has a dead-end job, a contemptuous ex-wife and a teenage son (Colin O'Brien) who can't stand to be with him.

Just the time, then, for the monkey to make a reappearance and begin another lethal scythe through the people it comes into contact with, starting with an ageing aunt whose protracted demise incorporates everything from a box of fishhooks to a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

The creative demises that follow offer plenty of grisly yuks in what eventually becomes an almost apocalyptic orgy of death and destruction. But having established that every character is fundamentally expendable, it seems odd that Perkins would ask us to invest emotionally in Hal and son Petey's thawing relationship, let alone the far more fractious one that resumes when Bill (James again) re-enters the scene.

That Tatiana Maslany, in the role of the twins' mother, is mostly confined to dream sequences and flashbacks also deprives this male-dominated yarn of some leavening feminine energy.

As a jump-filled, guts-splattered thrill-ride, however, *The Monkey* is never short of funny moments – not least when Elijah Wood pops up as a self-styled expert in fatherhood. **Neil Smith**

Don't forget the lid when blending a smoothie.

> **There's a real élan to this cavalcade of calamity**

i The monkey bangs its drum to "I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside", the popular music hall song first recorded in 1909.

SEPTEMBER SAYS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

18 | 100 minutes

Director **Ariane Labed**

Cast **Mia Tharia, Pascale Kann, Rakhee Thakrar**

Based on a 2020 novel by Daisy Johnson, this is the directorial debut of Ariane Labed, best known for her leading role in *Attenberg*. And it's not hard to trace a line from the antisocial, sexually naive, animalistic character she played in said Greek drama.

It follows the meek July (Mia Tharia) and dominating September (Rakhee Thakrar), sisters who while not twins are often snapped in matching outfits by their photographer mother, and practically joined at the hip. Their strange behaviour – which includes barking and growling – sees them labelled freaks at school. After July becomes the victim of cyber-bullying, the family decamp to Ireland for a holiday.

You may be thinking "All well and good, but does it warrant *SFX*'s attention?" For the first hour or more, we were of the same mind. Then their mother randomly finds two lemurs in the kitchen, which just as quickly vanish – a surrealist touch that serves to solidify a general uncanny tone. Finally, a twist arrives; though cunningly disguised, it's a variation on one common in psychological thrillers of this ilk.

Don't go to *September Says* expecting a fantastical flight of fancy, then. But it is worth a look for excellent performances by its two young leads, who breathe fascinating life into their oddball siblings, with their childish habits and flashes of psychopathy. **Ian Berriman**

THE RULE OF JENNY PEN

Plastic fantastic

★★★★☆

RELEASED 14 MARCH
TBC | 103 minutes
Director **James Ashcroft**
Cast **Geoffrey Rush, John Lithgow, Nathaniel Lees, Holly Shanahan**

"What's that, Jenny? Kill them all, you say?"

Creepy dolls have been a favourite plaything of the horror genre since ventriloquist dummy Otto elicited shudders in 1929's *The Great Gabbo*. Dementia doll Jenny Pen is the latest model to get in on the act, and deserves her space in the toybox.

Like Otto, Jenny is not herself evil in the manner of Chucky, Annabelle, Megan et al. It is Dave Crealy (John Lithgow), the owner of the hand that animates her, who's the sociopath here, calculatedly terrorising his fellow care home residents without ever arousing the staff's suspicions. But now the sly bully has met his match, for Stefan Mortensen (Geoffrey Rush), an arrogant, unforgiving judge, arrives at the hospice following a stroke, and immediately decides to dispense some justice.

Like *What Ever Happened To Baby Jane?*, *The Rule Of Jenny Pen* is an escalating battle of cruel wits that benefits from the considerable abilities of its senior stars. Rush truly captures the terror of failing health, while Lithgow's gleefully mean-spirited performance will please fans of *Dexter* and *Raising Cain* (watching the way Crealy clears the dancefloor during "Knees Up Mother Brown" is enough to infect the old pub ditty forever).

Interestingly, writer/director James Ashcroft located horrors in a juvenile detention centre in his debut feature *Coming Home In The Dark*. Here, the retirement home is filmed in muted colours and soft-focus backgrounds, a hermetic world of mundane routine and fading senses. The occasional bright colour (sickly greens, menacing reds) and forced-perspective shot (*looong* corridors) only amplify the unease.

> **"Jenny is not herself evil in the style of Chucky"**

Jamie Graham

ℹ Stephen King tweeted that *Jenny Penn* is "one of the best movies I've seen this year... I urge you to watch it".

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- A line of dialogue wouldn't feel out of place on International Talk Like A Pirate Day.
- One of the kids uses "wizard" as a synonym for "excellent".
- The show's one-and-only lightsaber ignites.

- An adult admits they've never heard of At Attin.
- Another of Jod Na Nawood's aliases is revealed.
- Wim spends one of his Old Republic Credits.
- X-Wing fighters make a cameo appearance.

SKELETON CREW Season One

Original Pirate Material

★★★★☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**

Showrunner **Jon Watts, Christopher Ford**

Cast **Jude Law, Ravi Cabot-Conyers, Ryan Kiera Armstrong, Kyriana Kratter, Robert Timothy Smith, Nick Frost**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **The latest *Star Wars*** TV show feels like a throwback to a more civilised age – and for all the right reasons. Not only does the effortlessly fun *Skeleton Crew* deliver a pitch-perfect imitation of classic Amblin movies from the '80s, it's also the first Lucasfilm offering in ages that doesn't require any advance revision to make sure you understand what's going on.

Because *Skeleton Crew* is a standalone adventure that just happens to use the vast *Star Wars* galaxy as a sandbox. It may be set in the same post-*Return Of The Jedi* time period as *The Mandalorian*, *The Book Of Boba Fett* and *Ahsoka*, but it never gets bogged down in the wider, increasingly complex mythology of the era. The most significant overlap is Vane, a bit-part pirate who crossed paths with Mando and Grogu in season three of *The Mandalorian*.

The premise – four ordinary pre-teens get lost in space – is far from original (*Explorers*, anyone?), but it's tackled with such joy and wonder that it really doesn't matter. Rather like Luke Skywalker on Tatooine, Jedi-obsessed Wim (Ravi Cabot-Conyers) dreams of adventure and excitement among the stars. But – having grown up on Planet Suburbia (otherwise known as At Attin) – he and his gang of space Goonies are even less equipped to deal with the darker corners of the galaxy.

> **"Doesn't require any advance revision"**

With the Imperial Remnant sitting this one out, bad guy duties fall to a gang of pirates. Although the script goes a little heavy on clichés of the high seas – at times *Skeleton Crew* feels like *Pirates Of The Caribbean* in space – there's a pleasing Jabba's Palace vibe to *Skeleton Crew*'s rogues' gallery.

Nick Frost has fun voicing hench-droid SM-33, while Jude Law's Jod Na Nawood is a wonderful enigma, a self-styled scoundrel who keeps you guessing about his true nature: could he be a lapsed Jedi, the kids' saviour, a genuine bad 'un or maybe a mix of all three?

Like almost every Disney+ show from the *Star Wars* or Marvel universes, *Skeleton Crew* could stand to lose an episode or two. Indeed, if Lucasfilm still made *Star Wars* movies (it's more than five years since *The Rise Of Skywalker*), this story would have worked brilliantly over two hours.

Nonetheless, co-creators Jon Watts and Christopher Ford (whose previous collaborations include *Spider-Man: Homecoming*) have rediscovered the joy of igniting a lightsaber or jumping to hyperspace, serving up a reminder of why we fell in love with George Lucas's universe in the first place.

Even if the *Skeleton Crew* adventure ends here – and we wouldn't feel shortchanged if it does – this likeable quartet of kids deserved their time in the suns.

Richard Edwards

One episode was directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, creators of *Everything Everywhere All At Once*.

YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD SPIDER-MAN Season One

New Peter

★★★★☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**

Creator **Jeff Trammell**

Cast **Hudson Thames, Kari Wahlgren, Grace Song, Eugene Byrd**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **An energetic** theme – starting with a sample of the 1967 cartoon theme before launching into a rap – perfectly indicates what *Your Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man* is all about: blending old and new in a fun way. Depicting Peter Parker's early days as Spidey, its events take place on an alternate timeline, and showrunner Jeff Trammell takes full advantage, putting a fresh spin on familiar beats.

Here Tony Stark isn't Peter's mentor; instead Norman Osborn is – a smart move, which cleverly subverts expectations. Norman's investment in Peter may not ultimately be in the young hero's best interests, making their alliance a fascinating one to follow.

That's just one way the series remixes lore. Fans will enjoy nods to MCU history scattered throughout, and it's chock-a-block with characters from the comics, including deeper cuts like Speed Demon and Unicorn.

But its beating heart is Peter's support network. In particular, his friends Nico (Grace Song) and Lonnie (Eugene Byrd) will steal audiences' hearts, with the former learning how to open herself up to others, and the latter feeling forced to make difficult choices.

The show opts for a stripped-back aesthetic. For the most part its colourful, cartoonish visuals work. However, in more emotional scenes their simplicity is unable to capture the deep feelings characters should be conveying.

It's arguably the only way the series falters, though. Trammell and co have not only given us a fresh take on Spider-Man, but one that does justice to the character.

Emily Murray

i For a while, Jeff Trammell considered "de-ageing" Jessica Jones and including her as a classmate of Peter Parker.

SEVERANCE Season Two

SFX Loves

Back to work

★★★★★

UK/US **Apple TV+, Fridays, streaming now**

Creator **Dan Erickson**

Cast **Adam Scott, Zach Cherry, Britt Lower, Tramell Tillman**

EPISODES 2.01-2.10 **Arriving so long** after its debut run even dedicated admirers may have forgotten the "previously on", this new season of the dystopian workplace thriller is every inch the match of the first. This is no difficult second album.

A quick reminder: it centres on employees of Lumon Industries – part corporate behemoth, part Church of Scientology – who have submitted to an implant which bifurcates their existence. On exiting the office, "Outies" retain no memory of their work day – and the "Innies" of Macro Data Refinement are no wiser as to why they drag random numbers into folders. Season one closed with three "Innies" activated in the outside world, *Quantum Leap*-ing into the lives of their counterparts.

It's a cliffhanger which initially requires considerable resetting to put our heroes back in the box. We're told Lumon has learned and changed due to their whistle-blowing attempts... Yeah, right.

What follows is a box of delights which deepens key relationships, expands the show's horizons, unpacks further implications of the high concept, and delivers wry satire of corporate culture's hollow rhetoric and petty humiliations.

A team-building retreat sees the Innies camping in a snow-shrouded national park. Romance blossoms between Mark ("really" a bereaved history professor) and Helly ("actually" the daughter of Lumen's CEO). Issues like "Is it cheating if you kiss your husband's Innie?" are explored. And you're never far from a delightfully absurdist touch like Miss Wong's theremin, or Irving's fruit head...

We get answers to questions *Lost* might have dragged out for another five seasons. Yes, Mark does meet the wife he believed was dead. And an explanation is given for what he's working on.

It all culminates in a 75-minute finale which (thematically at least) feels like a satisfying wrap-up (and whose events leave you wondering how key characters could continue to play a part). Fingers crossed for a season three green light, as there's so much more of this endlessly ingenious, linguistically dextrous, flawlessly realised universe left to explore. **Ian Berriman**

i The animated "Lumon Is Listening" corporate video in episode one features the voice of Keanu Reeves.

THE GORGE

Mind the gap

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | SVOD

Director **Scott Derrickson**

Cast **Anya Taylor-Joy, Miles Teller, Sigourney Weaver, Sope Dirisu**

APPLE TV+ **In romcoms they call it** the "meet cute" – the moment two potential lovers meet in improbable circumstances.

Released for Valentine's Day, this perverse blend of date flick and high-concept horror delivers one of the stranger meet cutes in movie history. In a remote mountain range, two elite snipers are drafted to keep watch above a mist-shrouded ravine, rumoured to be nothing less than the gateway to Hell itself.

It's a top-level "containment strategy", a pact by East and West initiated in the aftermath of the Second World War. Looking like a combat-ready wood sprite, the reliably charismatic Anya Taylor-Joy is Drasa, the Eastern crack shot. Miles Teller – troubled, earnest, just a little dull – takes aim as Levi, the Western marksman. Standing guard in their respective towers on opposite sides of the chasm, they are officially forbidden from making contact. Naturally they begin a long-distance relationship, communicating via binoculars and cheeky notes and flirty exchanges of firepower.

It's here, in the very set-up, that the logic of it all begins to splinter. Even after the gorge disgorges a horde of gnarly "Hollow Men", scuttling up the cliff face like a hungry zombie army, the cuteness continues, seemingly equally unstoppable. Drasa holds up a sign saying "Best birthday ever" – as opposed to "What the actual f***?!" – and they laugh across the divide, as if she's just spilled ketchup on her best blouse on a first date. In the months that follow they make snowmen and dance adorably to the Ramones before Levi finally abandons his post, zip-wiring over for dinner and a shag.

None of it feels true. This Hollywood adorability not only undermines the reality of these elite military veterans but the very threat at the heart of the story. Wouldn't simple survival instinct insist they spend every last second anxiously levelling their guns at the canyon, awaiting the next onslaught? And why, given what's ultimately revealed as the world-threatening scale of this threat, is it only held at bay by two snipers?

The tone shifts and darkens at the halfway mark. As we head into the depths of the gorge itself, director Scott Derrickson (*Doctor Strange*, *The Black Phone*) marshals some effectively nightmarish imagery. It's a twisted fairy tale realm, seasoned with bio-horror, where the bloodied pincers of giant bugs emerge from a forest of bones and branches, and skull-faced spiders break from the shadows.

Pity, then, that it's all in the service of what often feels like a videogame narrative, generic sequences of assorted perils being blasted into bits by guns.

The Gorge has a great hook, and eerie spectacle to spare. But it's torn apart by its own divide, caught between romance and terror and never quite finding the sweet spot in-between.

Nick Setchfield

"So, uh, do you come here often?" "Oh, *you*."

> **"A perverse blend of date flick and high-concept horror"**

i The Hollow Men are named after TS Eliot's 1925 poem – also the inspiration for the title of a *Doctor Who* novel.

MERMAID LEGEND

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1984 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Toshiharu Ikeda**

Cast **Mari Shirato, Jun Etō, Kentarō Shimizu, Yoshirō Aoki**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Let's get two** things straight for starters. This Japanese film doesn't feature a mermaid. And there's no reference to a legend. Someone call Trading Standards!

Director Toshiharu Ikeda is best known for gruesome 1988 horror *Evil Dead Trap*. So it confounds expectations that *Mermaid Legend* kicks off as a sensitively drawn portrait of ruthless capitalism, in which fishermen fall foul of the machinations of developers.

A diver's husband is murdered while she's underwater. Surviving attempts to off her too, the shell-shocked Migiwa (Mari Shirato) hides out, eventually returning to enact bloody vengeance.

As events progress, things become increasingly heightened. Migiwa lives through impossible damage; by the end, as she slashes a swathe through corporate suits, she's become an elemental force.

This bravura 10-minute sequence alone makes a viewing worthwhile. A stumbling, chaotic massacre, featuring high-pressure spurts of blood, it looks like it must have been utterly *exhausting* to film.

Extras Writer Takuya Nishioka (30 minutes) recalls Ikeda as so "hard to deal with" he tried to exit the project. A 20-min video essay on composer Toshiyuki Honda (whose wistful theme impresses), picks out some highlights of his jazz-funk oeuvre. Plus: a rather dry critical commentary; trailer. **Ian Berriman**

THE TERMINAL MAN

Runaway brain

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 10 MARCH
1974 | 15 | Blu-ray
Director **Mike Hodges**
Cast **George Segal, Joan Hackett, Richard A Dysart, Jill Clayburgh**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Though the general** public were less enthusiastic, Stanley Kubrick was an ardent admirer of this adaptation of a Michael Crichton novel by the director of *Get Carter*.

It's not hard to see why: in foregrounding its themes of depersonalisation, Mike Hodges brings a chilly detachment to this tale of a man (George Segal) who has psychosurgery to control the seizures which induce blackouts and psychotic violence.

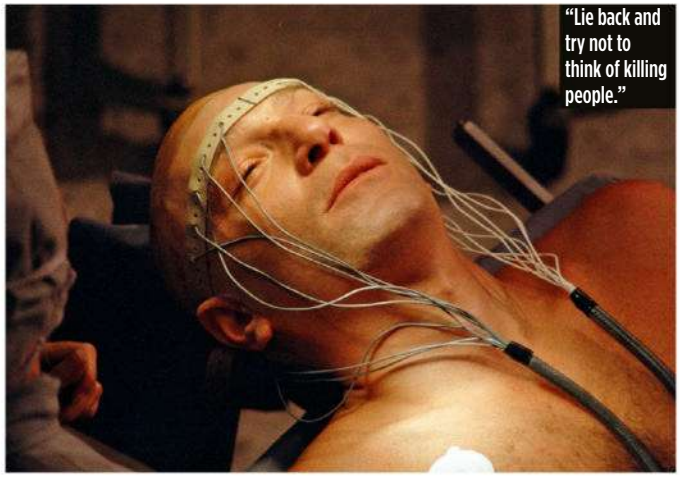
It all goes horribly wrong, of course – Harry Benson's brain becomes addicted to the stimulus from electrodes, triggering the seizures increasingly rapidly until he's tipped over the edge.

Misrepresented by poster art more suited to *The Six Million Dollar Man*, it's a deliberately sterile affair, with a melancholy Bach score. Denuded of human warmth or colour (Hodges wanted to shoot in black and white – this was as close as he could get), it boasts some powerful imagery: a slow-mo waterbed killing; blood trickling along the cracks between floor tiles, suggestive of the destructive impulses firing through Benson's synapses.

Extras This Arrow Video release offers both the theatrical cut and the director's cut (which snips some studio-mandated exposition designed to make Harry more sympathetic). There are three new visual essays. Josh Nelson argues persuasively that the film is a "misunderstood masterpiece" (19 minutes). Howard S Berger (who got to know both the men in question) draws out a recurring theme of "institutional brainwashing" in Hodges's filmography (22 minutes), then pays tribute to cinematographer Richard Kline (26 minutes). Berger also contributes to a solid critical commentary.

Plus: A nine-minute excerpt from 2022 doc *Mike Hodges: A Film-Maker's Life*; trailer; gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

> **A deliberately sterile affair, with a melancholy Bach score**



The film's look was heavily influenced by Edward Hopper's work, after Hodges came across a book on the painter.

CRONOS

Blood Grandpa

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1992 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray
Director **Guillermo del Toro**
Cast **Federico Luppi, Ron Perlman, Claudio Brook, Margarita Isabel**

Great filmmakers don't usually arrive fully formed, but Guillermo del Toro did: his debut is a compendium of images and themes that he'd later obsessively revisit, from sympathetic monsters and family melodrama to innocent children and scuttling roaches.

Federico Luppi is Mexico City antiques dealer Jesús Gri, who discovers a mysterious golden artefact. Invented by an alchemist, it can grant immortality by filtering your blood. But such rejuvenation comes at a cost...

Toying with religious imagery (it's no coincidence Gri's wounded in the palm) it's a highly original spin on vampirism, elevated by the old man's touching relationship with his mute granddaughter, and eccentric character work. Ron Perlman excels as a heavy tasked with acquiring the device; Angel is a thug, but with his sardonic manner and plastic surgery obsession, one with personality. And as we've come to expect from del Toro, the craftmanship behind the world-building is hugely impressive.

Extras Few directors are more articulate, passionate and open about their inspirations, aims and methods – something evidenced across del Toro's six appearances in this two-disc BFI set.

Jason Wood's new expert commentary is solid, though both this and an old producers' one pale in comparison to del Toro's 2002 yack track, which delivers all the granular detail you could want. Also fresh: a del Toro interview with a French critic (34 minutes).

He's further represented via an on-stage BFI talk (74 minutes, 2017) and two 2010 interviews (18/60 minutes). The latter stems from the 2011 Blu-ray, as does a chat with DOP Guillermo Navarro (13 minutes). A Ron Perlman interview (seven minutes), in which he calls the film "life-altering", is of a similar vintage.

Also familiar are a 2006 Luppi interview (five minutes), and 1987 short "Geometria" (six minutes), a lurid tale of a boy who summons a demon. The director also discusses that (seven minutes). Plus: trailer; a comprehensive gallery (15 minutes long!); 60-page booklet; four postcards; poster. **Ian Berriman**

One inspiration for the Cronos device was the maquech beetle, sometimes adorned with jewels and worn as a living brooch.

THE WITCHER: SIRENS OF THE DEEP

Something fishy

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | SVOD

Director **Kang Hei Chul**

Cast **Doug Cockle, Joey Batey, Anya Chalotra, Christina Wren**

NETFLIX **Set during the first** season of the TV show, *Sirens Of The Deep* comes two years after *The Witcher*'s last live-action episode and four since the previous animated film (*Nightmare Of The Wolf*). It's based on Andrzej Sapkowski's 1992 story "A Little Sacrifice", although details have been added with wild abandon.

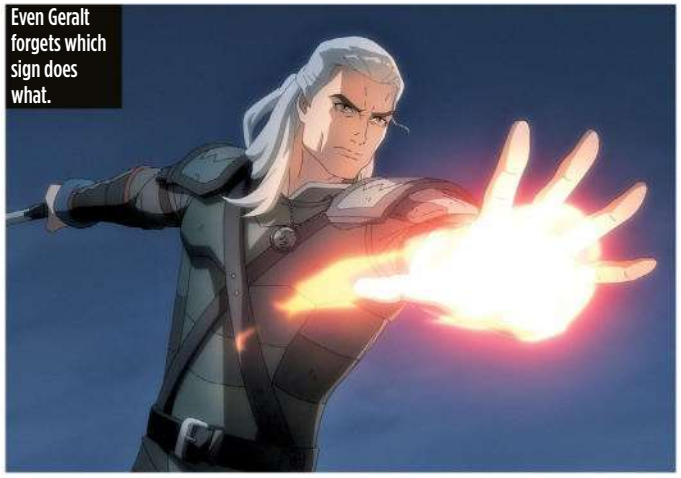
Joey Batey (Jaskier) and Anya Chalotra (Yennefer) reprise their roles from the series, but the Witcher's voice is Doug Cockle, who played Geralt in the videogames. Studio MIR provides the anime visuals again, delivering atmospheric combat sequences.

The folklore plundered for the plot is the tale of the Little Mermaid, with a dash of *Romeo And Juliet*. Geralt is hired to rid Bremervoord of a monster which has been eating local pearl harvesters. Meanwhile, the prince of Bremervoord is in love with the mermaid Sh'eenaz. Bremervoord is Jaskier's home, and he introduces Geralt to old friend Essi, who falls for the Witcher, although her role and affection for Geralt seem undercooked to make space for secondary characters.

> **"There are some rather peculiar tonal shifts"**

Several sequences occur in the merfolk's underwater kingdom, giving us not-entirely-welcome *Aquaman* flashbacks, and there are some rather peculiar tonal shifts: we're treated to a song by the sea witch Melusina, creating an unexpected Disney vibe.

It's better paced and more thrilling than the recent *LOTR* animation *The War Of The Rohirrim*. Themes of greed, prejudice and compromise run throughout, and there's a great twist, with an outcome vastly different from the source material. Purists may despair... **Dave Bradley**



Even Geralt forgets which sign does what.

ℹ A new *Witcher* novel, *Rozdroże Kruków* (*Ravens' Crossroad*), came out in Poland in November. No word yet on a translation.

MOM

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | Download

The real monster in this neatly circular little ghost story is the lack of appropriate psychiatric care offered to new parents. Poor Meredith is struggling with a newborn and a completely useless partner – but when she tells her therapist that she's seeing ghosts and fantasising about murder, no actual help is offered.

So while, yes, there are a couple of decent jump scares and some truly horrible gore images, what's really scary is how plausibly tragic the whole heartbreaking story feels. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE BABY IN THE BASKET

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | DVD/download

Say what you will about the Devil but he certainly puts it about. The latest entry in the Satan-spawn genre finds a demonic bundle of joy left on the doorstep of a remote Scottish monastery, to be cared for by an order of nuns.

This Luciferian riff on the Moses myth is well-shot and benefits from a real world location. But the storytelling often feels stilted, and despite some effective atmosphere there's a lack of essential dread.

Extras None. **Nick Setchfield**

CARA

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | N/A | Download

Fearing an imminent return to a mental institution, a psychologically troubled internet camgirl takes revenge on an abusive world in this indie horror.

Building to a viciously bloody, borderline absurd finale, this is a tough, frequently grisly watch, anchored by Elle O'Hara's performance as Cara, as steely as she's vulnerable. Hallucinatory scenes show director Hayden Hewitt has a gift for horror imagery, but it's the more grounded moments that prove the most disturbing. **Nick Setchfield**

THE DEAD THING

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | N/A | SVOD

SHUDDER **This indie horror** basically asks "What if you were ghosted by a ghost?". After the alienated Alex takes a shine to her latest app hook-up, Kyle, she sees him with another woman – then is shocked to learn that he died a while ago.

It's a challenging role for former New Mutant Blu Hunt (certain sequences resemble trippy POV porn), who acquits herself well. But they should have splashed on grotesque car crash victim prosthetics for the undead Kyle. And ultimately it all boils down to a controlling boyfriend drama. **Ian Berriman**

THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE 2

The family that slays together

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1986 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Tobe Hooper**

Cast **Dennis Hopper, Caroline Williams, Jim Siedow, Bill Moseley**

How do you follow up one of the greatest horror films of all time? Tobe Hooper's solution: by deploying a tone completely at variance from the original.

While *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* has a gruelling sense of realism and bleakness, its belated sequel is an outrageously OTT effort which embraces black humour, to campy effect. This pleased few at the time, but decades later Hooper's attempt to do something different can be better appreciated.

Following radio DJ Stretch (Caroline Williams) as she investigates the cannibal clan, and relishing white trash culture as enthusiastically as a John Waters film, it boasts some vivid performances. A post-rehab Dennis Hopper brings steely intensity to his role as a cowboy-hatted, saw-wielding avenger (uncle of the '74 film's Sally), and Bill Moseley is off-the-hook as deranged Vietnam vet Chop Top.

Tom Savini's gore effects impress in a high-octane opening which sees an unlikeable yuppie sawed in the head from a moving vehicle. So does the nightmarish production design of the Sawyers' labyrinthine underground lair. So while *2* exists in the shadow of its harrowing, vérité-style predecessor, it's not the catastrophic failure many once derided it as.

Extras Arrow Video's two-disc Limited Edition is a significant upgrade on their 2017 release. The only new commissions are two visual essays (24/14 minutes). One argues that the film "questions the validity of Reaganomics"; the other compares it to European films like *WR: Mysteries Of The Organism*. The target audience for such genre-gentrifying windbaggery remains unclear.

Bonuses carried over from 2017 provide two highlights: 2006's *It Runs In The Family*, an excellent feature-length doc (82 minutes); and a talking head by the ever-astute Stephen Thrower (29 minutes, 2013).

"Oh come on now, put a brave face on it."

> **Dennis Hopper brings steely intensity**

Goodies from editions by Shout Factory (2016) and Vinegar Syndrome (2022) have also been hoovered up. Altogether there are 10 interview pieces (totalling 203 minutes); stand-outs include Williams, who "loved every minute" despite becoming "a map of bruises", and a stuntman who calls the shoot "a grind of souls".

Plus: three cast/crew commentaries; further interviews shot for Cannon Films doc *Electric Boogaloo* (40 minutes); offcuts from *It Runs* (30 minutes); a locations trip (25 minutes); behind-the-scenes footage (43 minutes); deleted scenes (11 minutes, from VHS); trailers/TV spots; galleries; booklet; poster; five postcards. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ Bill Moseley was cast as a result of making a parodic short film entitled *The Texas Chainsaw Manicure*.

LEGEND OF THE 8 SAMURAI

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1983 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Kinji Fukasaku**

Cast **Hiroko Yakushimaru, Hiroyuki Sanada, Etsuko Shihomi**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This bonkers** dark fantasy represented a second bite of the apple for director Kinji Fukasaku. Like his 1978 *Star Wars* cash-in *Message From Space* (a previous Eureka! Masters Of Cinema release), it's a loose take on 19th century epic novel *Satomi Hakkenden*.

Legend Of The 8 Samurai similarly looks to the West, its writer advised to draw not only from George Lucas's space opera, but Indiana Jones. *Flash Gordon* also leaps to mind. Featuring blasts of cheesy soft rock, it's all turned up to 11.

Following an escaped princess who gathers eight "dog-warriors" to take on the undead clan who slaughtered her family, it's a stylish production, richly stocked with extravagant costuming and sets – one sword fight unfolds before a gorgeous mural riffing on Gustav Klimt's "The Kiss".

It boasts some fabulous supernatural elements: an old crone who turns into a giant centipede; an enormous flying snake. So you can easily see why it was the most successful Japanese-made film of 1984.

Extras A video essay (16 minutes) provides an excellent summary of production matters. The late director's son discusses his attitudes and working methods (25 minutes). A critical commentary proves somewhat monotonous. Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

DOCTOR VAMPIRE

Horror Hospital

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1990 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Jamie Luk**

Cast **Bowie Lam, Ellen Chan, Sheila Chan, Peter Kjaer**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Belatedly riding** the coat-tails of Ricky Lau's *Mr Vampire*, this horror-comedy mixes things up by substituting the Western vampire for the "hopping corpse" jiangshi of Chinese folklore. Bowie Lam's young surgeon is bitten during a trip to England (amusingly depicted as a place where your local castle may contain a pub/brothel). On returning home, he starts to develop a taste for the red stuff – and wearing a black cloak.

It's a tradition the film seems curiously unengaged in, too busy inventing its own eccentric lore – last time we checked, Dracula couldn't throw martial arts blows from a distance, or fire laser beams from his eyes...

The comedy is broad and juvenile. The medic's sidekicks act more like frat boys than surgeons. In one scene, a nurse who bursts in on them examining their friend's bite marks leaps to the conclusion that they're fellating him. Another sequence sees a vampirised patient shambling about with a prominent boner.

The script still raises the odd chuckle, but the movie is only really saved when the caucasian Big Bad – a curly-haired Count rocking (shudder) a ponytail –

> **"The medic's sidekicks act more like frat boys"**

turns up in Hong Kong, prompting some satisfyingly acrobatic action. Just be prepared for references to "sissies" and an AIDS gag en route.

Extras In a talking head (20 minutes), academic Stacey Abbott draws useful (if obvious) parallels to the likes of *Vamp* and *The Lost Boys*. When not getting bogged down in describing the plot (or throwing around phrases like "patriarchal and colonial dominance"), a video essay (22 minutes) details filmic examples of times when the usual defences against vampires don't work. This Eureka! release also includes chatty, jovial commentaries by two different pairs of Hong Kong cinema experts, and comes with a booklet. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ The castle is Allington Castle, in Kent. Filming for the 1965 *The Avengers* episode "Castle De'ath" took place there too.

GOLEM

A made man

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1979 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Piotr Szulkin**

Cast **Krystyna Janda, Marek Walczewski, Joanna Żółkowska**

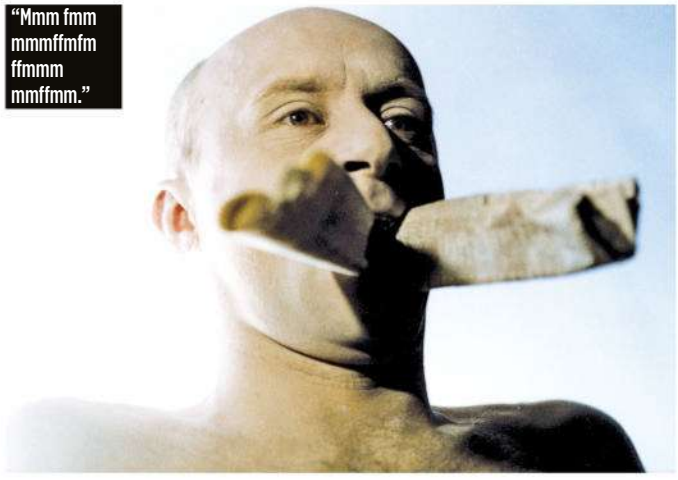
BLU-RAY DEBUT **Polish filmmaker** Piotr Szulkin's profile in the West got a boost last year via a Radiance box set release. Second Sight now expand the picture with his debut.

Like his later works, it's an idiosyncratic, gloomy, satirical take on sci-fi – though the director himself preferred the term "asocial fiction". Gustav Meyrink's 1915 novel *The Golem* is an accredited source, but as Szulkin found that indigestible (resorting to asking a friend to summarise chapters) it's more a distillation of fragments than an adaptation per se.

Painted in mouldy green hues, it's set post-global nuclear war, in a world of Dickensian squalor. Marek Walczewski plays the blank slate (but good-hearted) product of an ill-defined "humankind reconstruction programme" aiming to create a "better, more resilient human" – though the balding, cardigan-wearing Permat is clearly no ubermensch.

A string of random encounters follows, often with belligerent characters – a police interrogator; a ranting student; a brusque, one-armed lift operator. There are surrealist touches aplenty: the windows of a building flap open and shut, almost as if it's alive; a marching band endlessly rehearses the same two steps.

The overall effect is both bleak and baffling, but as absorbing as a vivid cheese dream. There are echoes of Franz Kafka and Andrei Tarkovsky, and Terry Gilliam would probably feel at home too.



Extras *Sight & Sound* writer Michael Brooke provides a very well-informed commentary; drawing on interviews and a novella version Szulkin wrote years later, it's highly illuminating.

The are four early shorts by the director. "Wszystko" ("Everything", seven minutes) simply records a refuse collector expertly spinning bins to the cart. "Copyright Film Polski MCMLXXVI" (four minutes) sees an apple slowly pulverised by an industrial press – an apt metaphor for life in the Polish People's Republic? Two more are, well, indescribable accumulations of non-sequiturs. Plus: storyboards for that fruit-torturing short; 20-page booklet. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ The opening titles use Albertus – the same font deployed on John Carpenter films like *Escape From New York* and *The Thing*.

SATAN'S BLOOD

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 28 FEBRUARY

1978 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Carlos Puerto**

Cast **Ángel Aranda, Sandra Alberti, Mariana Karr, José María Guillén**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Testing the** moral boundaries of post-Franco Spain, this entry in the Eurosleaze canon may introduce itself with a sober, Open University-style lecture on black magic – "There exists an aesthetic of evil" – but its titillating intentions soon become clear as a pair of newlyweds find themselves in the clutches of occultists.

With only four main players and one key location, it's essentially a creepy, lusty chamber piece, exploiting the fear and fascination of the '70s swingers' scene. The Satanic seduction premise is a slim excuse for the orgiastic action, but it rallies for an authentically nightmarish final sequence, as illogical as it is haunting.

Extras New bonus content for this 4K restoration includes an astute personal appreciation by writer Stephen Thrower (49 minutes) and an equally informed look at the career of producer Juan Piquer Simón by Kim Newman (20 minutes). There's also an enjoyably exhaustive survey of '70s Satanic cinema (26 minutes), an overview of Spanish horror (13 minutes), and a commentary by experts Jonathan Rigby and Kevin Lyons.

An archival retrospective (47 minutes) talks to cast and crew. There's also an interview with composer Librado Pastor (19 minutes), who performs some classic themes (nine minutes). Plus: trailer, gallery, booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

Both: "How *do* you get your hair like that?"

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

Being He-Man

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1987 | PG | Blu-ray

Director **Gary Goddard**

Cast **Dolph Lundgren, Frank Langella, Meg Foster, Courteney Cox**

BLU-RAY DEBUT ***Masters Of The Universe*** landed too late to capitalise on either the post-*Star Wars* fantasy slipstream or the popularity of the He-Man toys and cartoon. With no iconic theme tune, no Prince Adam and few of the franchise's heroes and villains, this overly serious live-action adaptation also bears little relation to the gloriously silly source.

In addition, the magic of Eternia is lost as the adventure relocates to Earth, with local kids Julie and Kevin (*Friends*' Courteney Cox and *Star Trek: Voyager*'s Robert Duncan McNeill) proving a poor substitute for Ram Man, Orko, Trap Jaw and co.

Frank Langella does his best to ham things up as Skeletor, but Dolph Lundgren does little more than look the part as He-Man. At least the makers of the upcoming movie know what *not* to do.

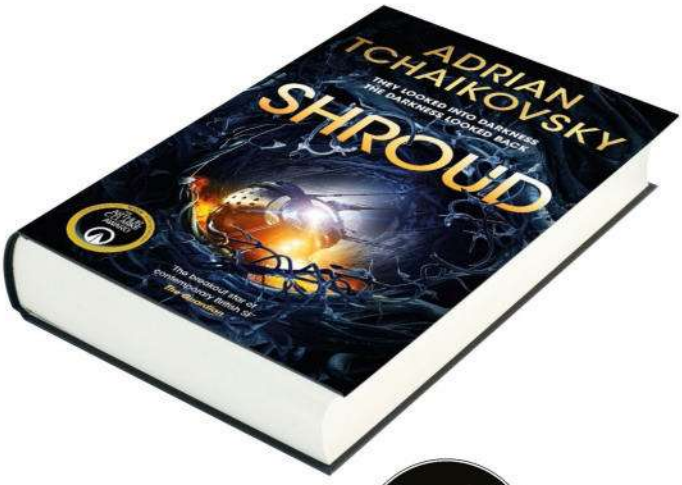
Extras The interviews on this 88 Films Collector's Edition – Lundgren (13 minutes), director Gary Goddard (44 minutes), producer Ed Pressman (seven minutes), co-writer Stephen Tolkin (four minutes) and production designer William Stout (10 minutes) – were conducted for 2014 documentary *Electric Boogaloo: The Wild, Untold Story Of Cannon Films*. So a significant chunk of the chat concerns the now-defunct studio and its unconventional owners. Beyond that, the filmmakers discuss the challenges of working on a franchise that was already in decline, while also accommodating Mattel's strict guidelines.

There's also an old commentary by the director, and a wonderfully retro 1987 featurette (five minutes). Plus: gallery; trailers; picture book; poster. **Richard Edwards**

i Skeletor minion Pigboy was played by eight-year-old Richard Szponder, who'd won a competition to appear in the movie.

ROUND UP

Hugh Grant flexes some different acting muscles in A24 horror **HERETIC** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), in which two young Mormon missionaries visit his Mr Reed, then find they've been locked in... We said: "A tense, talky thriller which thrusts fascinating theological questions to the forefront gives way to something much sillier." Sole bonus: a commentary by writer/directors Scott Beck and Bryan Woods. Set 200 years before Frodo's time, anime movie **THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM** (3 March, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) explores the conflict that gave Helm's Deep its name. We said: "Spirited performances and a rich seam of references ensure this is a worthy prequel." Extras: three featurettes (27 minutes). In German-language thriller **THE UNIVERSAL THEORY** (out now, Blu-ray), a physicist attending a conference is tangled up in a mystery involving a series of strange deaths and something dangerous in the heart of the Alps. We said: "There's a sweeping grandeur to the visuals... The plot is less effective: a string of bizarre incidents." Bonuses? Nein. As you'll surely know, **WICKED** (10 March, Blu-ray/DVD) adapts the hit musical centred on Elphaba (aka the Wicked Witch of the West) and Glinda (... the Good). We said: "Has all the makings of a superior musical movie moment." Bonuses: a sing-along version; 10 deleted scenes; a 46-minute Making Of; three featurettes; two commentaries (director Jon M Chu/the two leads). Finally, the latest TV box set is **THE MANDALORIAN** Season Three (out now, 4K & Blu-ray).



SHROUD

SFX Loves

Strange New World

★★★★★

RELEASED **27 FEBRUARY**
438 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **Adrian Tchaikovsky**
Publisher **Tor**

Space-set science fiction can fall anywhere between big, cerebral ideas, and the adventure and excitement we crave from *Star Wars*. Adrian Tchaikovsky's latest, *Shroud*, manages to straddle both extremes, as the author delivers a pacy adventure that keeps you thinking, even when its protagonists are in extreme peril.

In this standalone tale, the human race has left Earth far behind, as greedy corporations colonise the galaxy in the name of profit. They make no secret of the fact that their employees are little more than a commodity, chemically and genetically manipulated to work in outer space. In order to protect the bottom line, they're kept in hibernation until their services are required.

Narrator Juna Ceelander is a professional go-between, a competent but unspectacular member of the "Special Projects" team, and the management glue that holds them together. They're assigned to research the titular Shroud, a freaky moon with no light, stronger-than-Earth gravity, and a soupy, poisonous, high-pressure atmosphere that makes it entirely hostile to humans.

Weirder still, the constant noise across the entire electromagnetic spectrum prevents their probes from returning any significant data about what's down there. In short, it's the complete antithesis of the friendly, oxygen-rich M-Class worlds that are the bread and butter of *Star Trek* – and the sort of hellscape where great tales of survival are born.

Juna and snappy engineer Mai Ste Etienne are the unfortunate crewmembers marooned on the surface with only a two-person walking craft to protect them from the lethal conditions outside. They can't see much on their viewscreens, but that may be a blessing, seeing as Tchaikovsky's story is set in an inventive – and genuinely alien – ecosystem. Because despite appearing to tick none of the boxes usually required for life, Shroud is absolutely teeming with the stuff. Most of it is unfriendly, and one ubiquitous species even exhibits signs of intelligence.

Telling the story in the first person is a wise narrative choice, as Juna's – and, by extension, Mae's – thought processes and fears have nowhere to hide. With everything they know about this world based on tiny, often unreliable snippets of information, it feels appropriate that the reader is never granted the status of a privileged observer.

The creatures and landscapes described are so out of the ordinary that it's hard to get a true picture of what's out there (it's also dark outside), adding to the moon's mystique. Indeed, while some books feel like thinly veiled "Come and get me!" pleas to Hollywood, *Shroud* is defiantly uncinematic, a novel perfectly engineered for its medium.

There are definite echoes of *Alien Clay*, Tchaikovsky's similarly brilliant 2024 SF novel, as *Shroud* evokes an unrelatable extraterrestrial world. It's also reminiscent of Andy Weir's *Project Hail Mary* in the way it explores

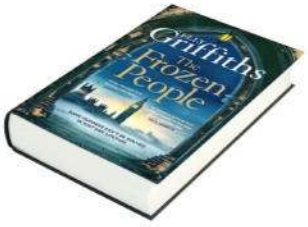
> **A novel perfectly engineered for its medium**

the difficulties of communicating with species when you don't have a Universal Translator, or *any* shared frame of reference.

Tchaikovsky sympathises with both his human protagonists and Shroud's unconventional fauna in a book that revels in questioning both perception and perspective. His strategic deployment of literary devices also keeps you guessing throughout – once you've finished, there are several passages you'll want to revisit with the benefit of hindsight.

If any of that makes *Shroud* feel like hard work, it really isn't. The "solve one problem, here's another" storytelling ramps up the tension, which Tchaikovsky is equally adept at dissipating with a smart quip. Remarkably, this is his fourth novel in the space of a year (plus a couple of novellas), but being prolific is clearly no barrier to quality. **Richard Edwards**

i Next up from Tchaikovsky is *Bee Speaker*, the third novel in his near-future-set Dogs Of War series. It's due for release in June.



THE FROZEN PEOPLE

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
352 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **Elly Griffiths**
Publisher **Quercus**

Elly Griffiths knows her way around a crime thriller, having penned the popular Dr Ruth Galloway series (among others). With *The Frozen People* she's tackling sci-fi, although the book's fantastical elements are presented without sensationalism, enabling her to continue that mainstream, down-to-earth realism.

Here we're introduced to detective Ali Dawson and her engaging cold-case team. On behalf of the British government, their task is to investigate past crimes by time-travelling back to witness who did what. They can't stop anything from happening, but they can at least find out the truth. Which is all well and good, until Ali travels back to London in the 1850s and can't get home again. Meanwhile, in the present day, the murder of an MP complicates everything.

Ali and her acquaintances are impeccably drawn, fleshed out so convincingly that you can visualise them as clearly as characters from, say, *Slow Horses*. There's a similar grubby reality to Griffiths's descriptions of life in London past and present, while the book's slow-burn mystery is fab.

If you wanted to be picky, you could argue the big finale whooshes by too quickly. But as this is the start of a series, there will be plenty of time to luxuriate in the eventual sequel. **Jayne Nelson**

FUTURE'S EDGE

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
320 pages | **Paperback/ebook**
Author **Gareth L Powell**
Publisher **Titan Books**

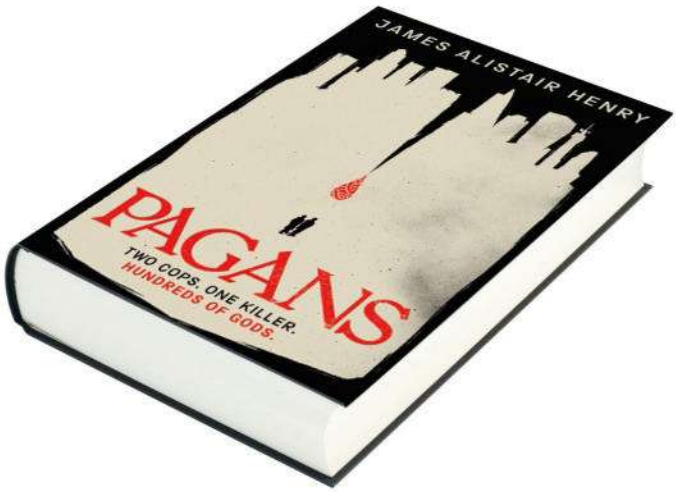
Having already written a trilogy starring a gun-wielding, fighter-pilot monkey (the Ack-Ack Macaque saga), Gareth Powell is clearly an author unafraid to let his freak flag fly. *Future's Edge*, at first glance, feels like it could capture a similarly lurid approach, but what we get is an oddly haphazard space opera that never quite figures out its dramatic tone.

The book follows Ursula Morrow, an ex-archaeologist stranded in an alien refugee camp thanks to an incursion of multi-dimensional entities trying to wipe out all life in the galaxy. Most of humanity is already dead, and Ursula might be key to saving what's left thanks to her encounter with an ancient alien artefact. She's drafted in to help by her soldier ex-boyfriend, who's now married to an intelligent starship. But of course.

Powell is clearly aiming for a rambunctious, *Firefly*-influenced adventure here, but the characterisation is surprisingly flat, only occasionally feeling truly compelling. And the bleaker story elements like Ursula's past alcoholism and the multiple ruminations on humanity's extinction sit oddly next to the flip humour and the regular *Casablanca* homages.

Future's Edge needed to fully embrace either its colourful weirdness or its gritty darkness, and instead ends up in unbalanced territory.

Saxon Bullock



PAGANS

Tribal Gathering

★★★★☆

RELEASED 27 FEBRUARY
292 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **James Alistair Henry**
Publisher **Moonflower Books**

The north-south divide has been a feature of British life for as long as anyone can remember. But what about the east-west divide? It's a gap, contends James Alistair Henry, that still affects us culturally today. In the novelist's reading, the Saxon east is a dog-eat-dog place, whereas the Celtic west is rather more chilled.

Demonstrating this case is complicated by the invasion of 1066, which overlaid a new ruling class upon England. But what might the country look like had this never occurred? What would a polytheistic London be like to move through?

These are questions Henry answers in *Pagans* via an approach rooted in alternate history, one in which the Normans never skewed Britain's story, with a Scandinavian-tinged police procedural taking place against a backdrop of talks to unite the Celtic West, Saxon East and Nordic Scotland.

There are powerful forces that don't much like the idea of a new nation, however, as becomes clear when a Celtic diplomat is murdered in a brutal and ritualistic manner. It falls on two cops with very different backgrounds – well-connected London homicide cop Aedith Mercia and a Celtic detective, Drustan of Dumnonia – to investigate. A serial killer, it seems, is on the loose.

Viewed purely as a crime thriller, *Pagans* – the first part in a planned trilogy – works beautifully, blessed with a plot that snaps into place at the end without ever seeming forced or contrived, and leads who are good company. Better still, the issues the book deals with – identity, racism and the divide between nationalists and internationalists – are handled adroitly.

Henry's world-building is arguably less impressive, although a more charitable reading here might be that he has an awful lot of details to sketch in, which sometimes weighs the book down. Nevertheless, by the end of the book you're anticipating the next volume. An exercise in slipstream crime fiction more than good enough to give the likes of Ben Aaronovitch and Adam Simcox a run for their money.

Jonathan Wright

Pagans has been optioned for Apple TV+ by production company Media Res (*The Morning Show*, *Scenes From A Marriage*).

SPELLS, STRINGS AND FORGOTTEN THINGS

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 27 FEBRUARY
400 pages | **Paperback/ebook**
Author **Breanne Randall**
Publisher **Aria**

In a small Californian town, three sister-witches run a shop selling tea and books. They spend their spare time at home with their cats, baking. Everything seems perfect; their lives are basically a Pinterest board the author has labelled "Cosy vibes".

But all is not what it seems. Calliope, Eurydice and Thalia lost their mother years before, a disappearance tied to a mysterious magical Dark Oak (basically a MacGuffin – the tree isn't really given much explanation). A dark witch named Lucien starts hanging around, a man Calliope can't stop thinking about – usually naked. And nasty wraiths are on the prowl, with murder on their minds.

As you may have worked out, it's all a bit *Charmed* (although the sex scenes here would make those TV-friendly ladies blush). It's also a jolly rehash of several current BookTok trends and magical tropes, none of them particularly original, but all of them perfectly readable.

It's just a shame that the prose is so pretentiously flowery and stuffed with descriptional clichés – characters have "fathomless" eyes "the colour of a storm-tossed sea", or "honey-wheat hair", for example. Once you start noticing these tics, they'll jar you out of the plot like a slap to the face. **Jayne Nelson**

THE ART OF THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM

Drawing from the past

★★★½☆

RELEASED 27 FEBRUARY
256 pages | Hardback
Authors **Daniel Falconer**
Publisher **HarperCollins**

The story of Helm

Hammerhand and his hitherto-unnamed daughter Héra, this anime version of one of Tolkien's untold tales is a lot better than its disappointing box office would suggest. Much of the reason for that is beautifully laid out in this book.

The Rohan society we first met in *The Two Towers* is analysed, adapted and built upon with great sensitivity, no doubt thanks to the inclusion of Middle-earth experts Alan Lee and John Howe, plus a wealth of expertise from *LOTR* stalwarts Wēta. Author Daniel Falconer, who worked as a concept artist on the film, interviews all the leading voices here, from producer Philippa Boyens to director Kenji Kamiyama and everyone in between.

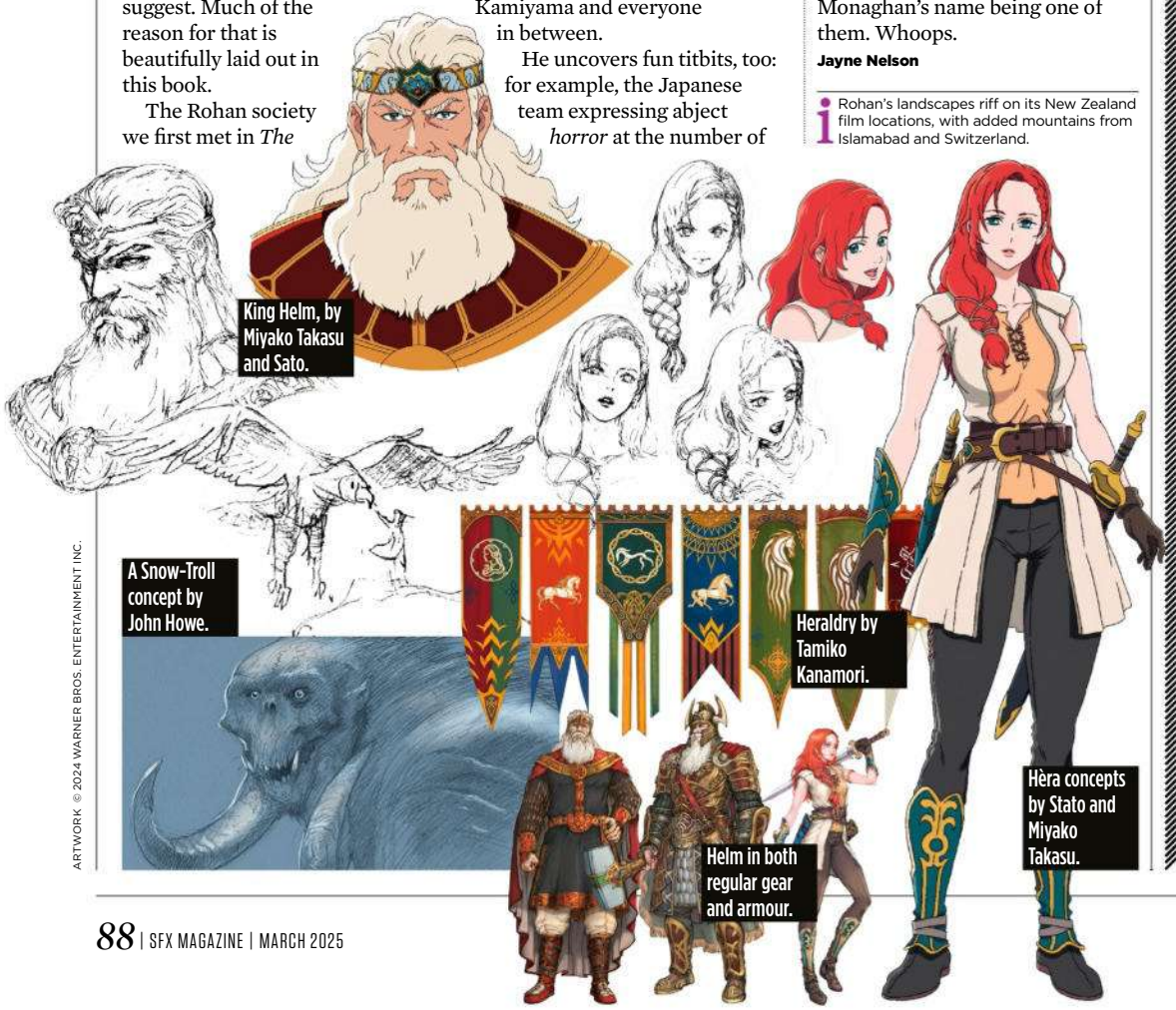
He uncovers fun titbits, too: for example, the Japanese team expressing abject *horror* at the number of horses they had to animate for a battle. Or art director Adam Middleton complaining that Peter Jackson had already shot all the best angles of Helm's Deep. Or that a designer's pet Java sparrow, Chai, was used as a reference for the eagles.

The end result, like the film, is a world you can get lost in – albeit with a few reservations, the misspelling of Dominic Monaghan's name being one of them. Whoops.

Jayne Nelson

i Rohan's landscapes riff on its New Zealand film locations, with added mountains from Islamabad and Switzerland.

Fledgeling Great Eagle art by Aisha Ari Hagiwara.



King Helm, by Miyako Takasu and Sato.

A Snow-Troll concept by John Howe.

Heraldry by Tamiko Kanamori.

Helm in both regular gear and armour.

Hèra concepts by Stato and Miyako Takasu.

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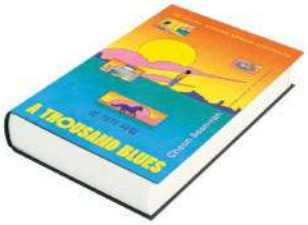


A THOUSAND BLUES

★★★★½

RELEASED 13 MARCH
268 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Cheon Seon-ran**
Publisher **Doubleday**

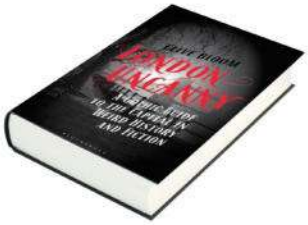
For those of us of a certain disposition (and, um, age), a few bars of the theme for *The Adventures Of Black Beauty* are enough to get us all misty-eyed. Once a horse fan, always a horse fan. So this writer may not be the *most* objective reviewer for a book about two teenage girls and a robot plotting to save the life of an ailing racehorse.

Ten years from now, robots have taken over every job from bank clerk to... jockey? Yes, in this translation of an award-winning Korean novel, the replacement of human riders with lighter-weight robots means racehorses are breaking records and raking in ever more filthy lucre.

The fact that our four-legged friends – like former champion Today – are also burning out faster is just a minor detail for their owners. Not so for sisters Eunhye and Yeonjae; or for Coli, Today's wrecked robot jockey, who is rescued from the scrapheap by Yeonjae. Their plan? To run the *slowest* race that Today has ever done.

On the face of it, this is a very simple tale. The novel is even structured so that we know (part of) the end right from the start. But the heartstring-tugging glimpses of a sad injured pony are cleverly layered with a multi-generational backstory about the various impacts of technological change on people's lives. Lovely stuff.

Nic Clarke



LONDON UNCANNY

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

240 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **Clive Bloom**

Publisher **Bloomsbury Academic**

Alan Moore's recent novel *The Great When* explores the notion that London has a shadow self – a fantastical other realm where all of humanity's ideas about the city are made manifest. Though Moore himself features only fleetingly in *London Uncanny*, this "gothic guide to the capital in weird history and fiction" offers a similar thesis.

Clive Bloom's book is about the resonances between real life strangeness and fictional events, taking in everything from Edgar Allan Poe to David Bowie, Hammer horror and Arthur Machen via the Invisible Man, *Hellraiser* and Aleister Crowley.

For example, one section of the book moves from the infamous Enfield Haunting to ghosts of a very different kind: *ABBA Voyage*, the hit stage show in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, where eerie hologram avatars of the four-piece, forever younger than their actual years, play the hits. That in turn is linked to Charles Babbage and the earliest computers, and then to the literal auto-eroticism of JG Ballard's novel *Crash*.

There will likely be moments reading *London Uncanny* where you scratch your head at some of Bloom's connections. This feels less like a book with a coherent point than a flâneur-ish stroll through the city's history, both real and imagined. Nevertheless it's always engaging, strange and suitably mind-altering. **Will Salmon**

SMALL FIRES

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED **27 FEBRUARY**

300 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Ronnie Turner**

Publisher **Orenda Books**

Once upon a time, there were two sisters who killed their parents. Or maybe it was just one of them? Neither sister was convicted of a crime, but everyone knew their story, so they ran away to the other side of the country to build a new life on a haunted island. Unfortunately, the stories followed them...

The act of storytelling shapes everything in this book, as everyone from kids to creepy old women in the woods has a tale (or 12) to tell. The main narrative is told from two perspectives: Lily, the younger, prettier sister that everyone likes; and Silas, an islander who hopes to extricate Lily from the clutches of her older, scarier sister Della.

But no matter who's talking, the prose is flowery and archaic – so much so that it's jarring when someone mentions listening to a podcast, because otherwise the events described could be happening a hundred years ago. It should be enchanting, but it feels too stilted to ring true.

More irritating is the attempt to construct a twist by clumsily obfuscating the details of the stories our characters tell. Everything comes down to the sisters – "one bitter, one sweet" – and which is the untrustworthy one, but there's no true mystery there, just a lot of portentous waffle.

Maybe not all stories are worth telling. **Sarah Dobbs**

GREENTEETH

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

279 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Molly O'Neill**

Publisher **Orbit Books**

A long-haired, green- skinned woman mythologised as evil, but who has more of a heart than you might have believed... no, it's not the Wicked Witch of the West, but Jenny Greenteeth, a "river-hag" of English folklore, who takes on a quest to save her new friends in this engaging debut by Molly O'Neill.

Jenny is shocked when a witch is thrown into her lake one spring day. Despite her carnivorous nature, she chooses to rescue Temperance and learns of the new parson who is stirring up hatred in the local village. Except he's not just a parson but in fact the Erl King of European myths, come to spread his evil to a Britain whose magic is dying. Joined by goblin tinker Brackus, Jenny and Temperance begin a journey around the isles to find a way to stop him causing further devastation.

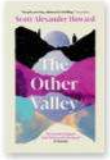
This is a charming tale of British folklore and landscape that explores friendship, family ties and belonging, as well as the confusion of conflicting identities in a changing world. Jenny's struggles with her painful past and uncertain future are gradually revealed, and though you're never really in doubt about the ending, the final twists and turns are cleverly played out.

It's a warm-hearted, satisfying read that shines with O'Neill's love for the source mythology. **Rhian Drinkwater**

REISSUES

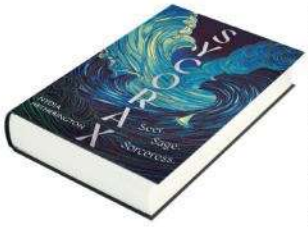
Our pick of the paperbacks is Taran Matharu's epic fantasy **DRAGON RIDER** (★★★★½, 27 February, HarperVoyager) – the YA author's first "grown-up" novel. It follows Jai, son of

an executed rebel, who lives as a hostage in the Sabine Court. When it descends into chaos after a coup, he takes the chance to escape, taking with him a handmaiden and a dragon egg which he "soul bonds" with. An epic journey of survival follows. We said: "The prose is colourful and the worldbuilding impressive... An exciting adventure ripe with ideas and passion." Scott Alexander Howard's debut **THE OTHER VALLEY** (★★★★½, 27 February, Atlantic) has an intriguing setup. A coming of age tale, it centres on a 16-year-old



girl living in one of a succession of identical valleys. Head west and you'll find the same town 20 years in the past; head east, and it's 20 years in the future. By seeing some visitors from the future, Odile realises that her friend is going to die... We said: "Lyrically written, and has a solidly gripping plot... A moving and quietly beautiful novel." Finally, Jinwoo Chong's satirical debut **FLUX** (★★★★☆, 4 March, Melville House) follows three interconnecting characters as their lives spin out of control – one a guy whose obsession with an '80s

cop show starts to bleed into reality after he agrees to brain scans for a shadowy tech startup. We said: "A beautiful and strange book, with a sardonic wit and a bitingly cynical view of corporate culture."



SYCORAX

★★★★☆

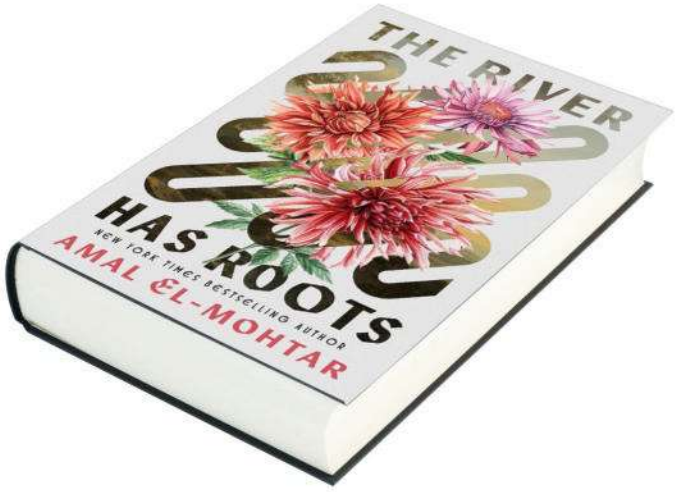
RELEASED 27 FEBRUARY
400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Nydia Hetherington**
Publisher **Quercus**

"The foul witch Sycorax" is an unseen character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* – dead before the play begins, she is the mother of Caliban, a "blue-eyed hag" who was expelled from Algiers and arrived on the island pregnant. This novel looks at the life that led her there, tying in a failed historical invasion and an examination of a life lived in chronic pain.

Raven – later named Sycorax by the townspeople – is born to a wise woman and her husband just outside an unnamed city. The locals' suspicion of witchcraft and outsiders hangs over everything, while Sycorax's attempts to build a life, using her medicinal potions and knowledge of the coming storms to help the port city, seem doomed to failure.

Her constant need to trust that this time things will be different and people will be understanding is heartfelt but frustrating, as time and again she is proved wrong. And her struggle with rheumatoid arthritis ("Sycorax who, with age and envy/Was grown into a hoop", said Prospero), from which the author also suffers, is well told.

With Sycorax living constantly in pain, trying to help people but always feared and shunned, the reader rages and hopes for her while always knowing where this story is going to end. It's a fascinating exploration of an obscure character. **Rhian Drinkwater**



THE RIVER HAS ROOTS

SFX Loves ★★★★★

Music, marriage and murder

★★★★★

RELEASED 4 MARCH
144 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Amal El-Mohtar**
Publisher **Arcadia**

If you're not familiar with folk music, your image of it probably consists of hippies wearing sandals, drinking cider, and singing about "maidens fair" with a finger in one ear. And yes, okay, there certainly are plenty of maidens about, but the typical tone is a lot less peaceful than you might imagine.

This lyrical new short novel, from one of the authors of the Hugo-winning *This Is How You Lose The Time War*, is steeped in the rhythms and sensibility of folk music. Specifically, it draws on the tropes of traditional ballads: songs that tell stories, often with a fantastical edge.

In a small town named Thistleford, the Hawthorn family sing folk songs to the willow trees on their land as they harvest magical wood for market. But as in a ballad like "Tam Lin", the wall between the worlds of humanity and of the supernatural is permeable here, such that an unwary stroller (or, in this case, a chicken) can cross the border into Arcadia without realising.

The two daughters of the family have reached the age where suitors are coming to call. Elder sister Esther prefers a shapeshifting contender from Arcadia, who has taught her to play the harp, over a greedy and charmless human neighbour whose overtures make Mr Collins from *Pride And Prejudice* seem appealing. Ysabel, meanwhile, feels quietly overshadowed by her golden-haired elder sister, and fears losing Esther to the realm of Faerie.

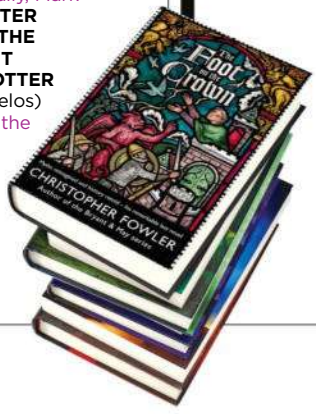
If you *are* familiar with folk music, you've probably already guessed that we're in murder ballad territory here. We won't spoil things by saying which one, but El-Mohtar's (sub)version reworks the tale in lilting prose and a heartfelt, feminist new key. A powerful, gorgeous little story of sisterly love, the power of words, and revenge as a dish best served in verse.

Nic Clarke

i *That* ballad (spoilers!) has been recorded by Bob Dylan, Tom Waits, Steeleye Span, Loreena McKennitt and Clannad.

ALSO OUT

As ever, there's plenty more books that we couldn't fit in (or which didn't arrive in time). The late Christopher Fowler's last novel, medieval fantasy **THE FOOT ON THE CROWN** (out now, Bantam) sees "myths reimagined and history retold". Set in London, it sees a mysterious outsider arriving in the court of King Scarabold – a dysfunctional place full of characters with names like Lord Carapace, Earl of Beetles. Set in 2272, in a partially submerged Buenos Aires, Michel Nieva's **DENGUE BOY** (out now, Serpent's Tail) blends body horror and cyberpunk, following a humanoid mosquito as he searches for his true origins. A sociopathic governess called Winifred Notty is the central character in Virginia Feito's sardonic period horror **VICTORIAN PSYCHO** (out now, Fourth Estate) – and she has gruesome plans for her employers and their children for Christmas... Turning to continuing series: our reviewer described Saara El-Arifi's *Faebound* as "a grimdark tale of neverending war that morphs into a throbbing romance". Sequel **CURSEBOUND** (out now, HarperVoyager) sees exiled Elf soldier Yeeran returning to her homeland, only to find that her former lover now threatens war against the fae. A follow-up to David Hair's fantasy adventure *The Burning Land*, **THE DROWNING SEA** (out now, Arcadia) revisits his world of Vestal Knights empowered by a magical crystal. Finally, Mark Iveson's **PETER CUSHING: THE RELUCTANT GLOBETROTTER** (out now, Telos) focuses on the limited number of films that the homebody horror icon made abroad.



THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Arkady Martine

This Hugo-winning author *didn't* quit the day job

KAREN OSBORNE

What is your daily writing routine like?

I don't have one, except to say that when I have a project in process I try to touch the manuscript every day, and get 100 new words. I have a weird and strangely scheduled other job, which can be alternately very intense and very quiet, so my daily schedule hasn't ever been conducive to building a daily routine that has more structure than keeping the project I'm working on active in my mind and close at hand.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

I got very stuck in the middle of writing *Rose/House* – which I wrote during the worst of the pandemic – mostly because that super-fluid process I mentioned broke down for me when I had no ability to divide my day into climate policy work and writing work and being at home with my wife. Turns out it's very difficult to concentrate on complex black-box murder mystery solutions when you have no structure in your own life!

Got any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

I have a terrible habit of beginning to write every story in second person; a kind of sketchy, hesitant grasping at the thematic shape while I vigorously tell my character *you, you, you are doing this, you specifically*.

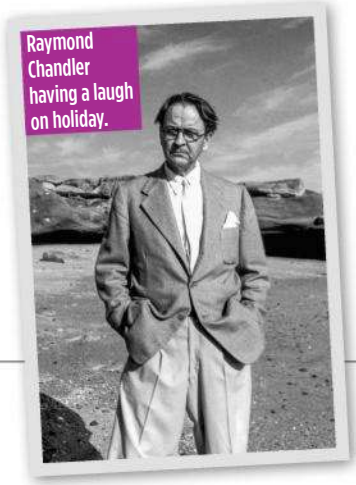
> **"I have never particularly wanted to be a full-time writer"**

Ever come up with a good plot idea in a dream?

Not a good plot idea, but the action sequence where the heretic priest is chased by his fae/demonic lover into a ruined church and has to kill her using only the shards of stained glass window he has put his hand through... that's pretty good.

Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?

I'm still learning from Raymond Chandler's attention to detail and clarity of prose. We often think of Chandler as being deeply clichéd, all "A dame walked into my office and I knew she was trouble", but when you actually look at his spare, imagistic, evocative style it's amazing how much he can do with very little. "I needed a vacation, I needed a home in the country. What I had was a coat, a hat and a gun. I put them on and went out of the room." Guh.



Raymond Chandler having a laugh on holiday.

GEORGE PLATT LYNES/CONDÉ NAST/GETTY

Recommend one book you love, that's not very well known.

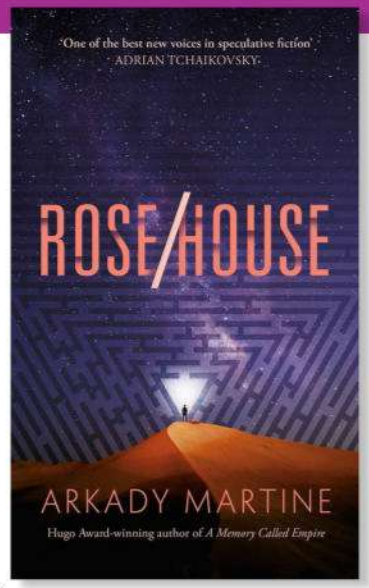
It's possible that I shouldn't have read Guy Gavriel Kay's *Tigana* as early as I did – I think I was 12 – but that book continues to resonate enormously for me and has shaped a lot of my own interests as a writer. The politics of memory, power, and desire are central to my own writing. As are unwise, difficult, and uncomfortable but incredibly real love stories, and lush, lyrical descriptive language.

Where's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?

In the hands of a New Mexico Public Regulation Commissioner.

What's the biggest misconception people have about being an author?

Oh, good lord, that we all immediately have the money – and the desire – to quit our day jobs the instant we get published. The money is a lot smaller than most people think, and it comes in strangely timed batches. More importantly for me, I like my other job, and I have never particularly wanted to be a full-time writer; there's not enough external input with just me alone with the inside of my head.


'One of the best new voices in speculative fiction'
ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY
ROSE/HOUSE
ARKADY MARTINE
Hugo Award-winning author of A Memory Called Empire

What's the best writing advice you've received or read?

There are no rules. There's only what works.

Rose/House is out on 13 March, published by Tor.

ABSOLUTE SUPERMAN

Working Man (of Steel)

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Jason Aaron**
Artist **Rafa Sandoval**

ISSUES 1-4 **For such an iconic** character, it's amazing how much Superman is viewed as an old-fashioned problem in today's pop culture. "Big-hearted lug who wants to use his powers for good" is somehow a lot less relatable than "Traumatised billionaire with a bat-themed arsenal", and DC's latest reboot shows both the benefits and the problems of modernising the Man of Steel.

Part of the *Absolute* universe, DC's new ongoing title up-ends the traditional Superman mythology (as with their *Absolute* versions of Batman and Wonder Woman). In this alternate reality, Krypton is a rigidly class-based society sleepwalking into environmental disaster, and these first four issues echo the themes of the original Siegel and Shuster stories from the '30s, where Superman was the champion of the working man.

Here, the "S" logo is the symbol of the working class, and Kal-El's parents are anti-establishment rebels fighting to evacuate the planet – but the series' biggest change is that Kal-El is fighting alongside them, since he's a young boy when Krypton meets its destruction.

This opening arc bounces between extensive Krypton sequences and Earth six years later, where a now-adult Kal-El is battling exploitative corporate action in South America, and coming up against Lazarus Corp agent Lois Lane.

Writer Jason Aaron packs these issues with plenty of incident and conflict, making this a briskly enjoyable read, and his work is complemented by artist Rafa Sandoval's eye for striking, well-crafted visuals.

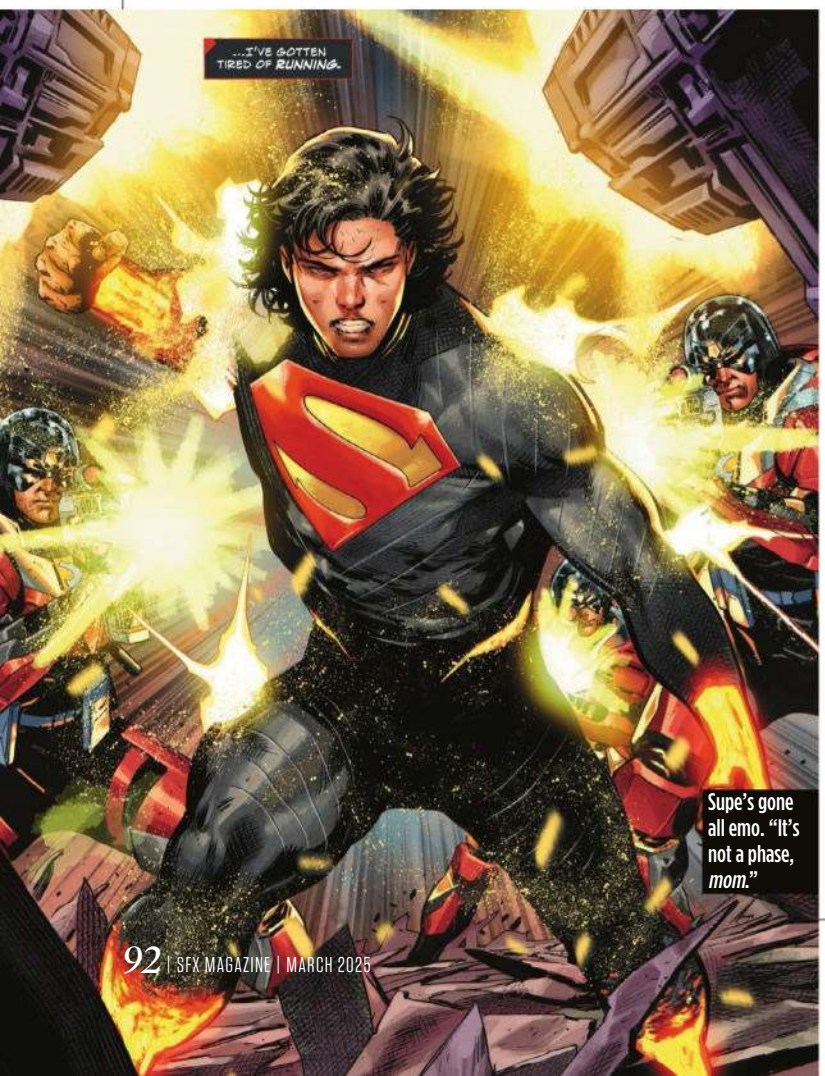
Unfortunately, the story's "mystery box" approach also causes significant problems; most notably, this new version of Superman is played so mysteriously that he's hard to care about. *Absolute Batman* did a much better job of quickly defining its protagonist, while here so much of the story is being told from other perspectives that Superman himself still feels distant and unknowable.

> **"Harder-edged and more violent than you'd expect it to be"**

The series is also harder-edged and more violent than you'd expect a *Superman* comic to be. While the story's deliberately political themes give it more modern-day relevance, it fails to avoid some uncomfortable white saviour tropes, while occasionally deploying the kind of grimdark "This ain't your daddy's Superman!" posturing that Zack Snyder would approve of.

Despite all this, Aaron clearly understands Superman, and does add moments featuring the heart and humanity that make him an iconic hero. There's potential for *Absolute Superman* to become a compelling take on the character – if it can figure out its current growing pains. **Saxon Bullock**

i Aaron's cousin is Gustav Hasford, who wrote the original novel that became the Stanley Kubrick movie *Full Metal Jacket*.



Supe's gone all emo. "It's not a phase, *mom*."

GODZILLA'S MONSTERPIECE THEATRE

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **IDW**
Writer/artist **Tom Scioli**

ISSUES 1-3 **Like *The League Of*** *Extraordinary Gentlemen* with added kaiju, this three-parter pits Godzilla against various vintage science heroes, fictional and factual.

Opening in New York in the Roaring Twenties, it turns Jay "Great" Gatsby into an unlikely action star when the love of his life Daisy Buchanan is lost at sea after Godzilla devastates the city. This prompts him to assemble G-Force, whose members include a cyborg Jules Verne and the Time Machinist.

Big G is often a background figure, as Tom Scioli portrays Jay, Daisy and her husband Neil Buchanan's tragic love triangle, before turning Daisy into the latest Bride of Dracula.

The story also boasts Sherlock Holmes, who doesn't really get any complicated conundrums to solve, and a female Watson; later Baron von Frankenstein, the Monster, the Mummy and some wolfmen are thrown into the mix.

While the dayglo colours are reminiscent of '60s newsprint, the real highlight is Scioli's eye-catching art. It combines Jack Kirby's dynamism with a Daniel Clowes-style indie edge, alternating between intricately designed multi-panel pages and awe-inducing spreads, such as the image of Jay transforming into a giant-sized, truly Great Gatsby. It all makes for a superbly phantasmagoric blast into the past. **Stephen Jewell**

LIFE

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DSTLRY**
Writers **Brian Azzarello, Stephanie Phillips**
Artist **Danijel Žeželj**

ISSUES 1-4 **Indie comics** publisher DSTLRY launched with the promise that they would do things a little bit differently. That's certainly the case with *Life*. This six-part thriller is split into two stories, "Pros" and "Cons", that can be read in any order, with each issue presented as a flip book.

In "Pros", ex-con Bobby leads his crew to an abandoned planet in the hopes of pulling off a final heist, little realising that the former mining colony isn't as uninhabited as he'd thought. In "Cons", a group of Earth's most notorious killers are forced to live out every moment of their multiple life sentences thanks to a twisted form of experimental punishment.

That *Life* is secretly one big story spanning hundreds of years is not a huge revelation. What *is* surprising is just how well the flip book format works to explore these different points of view. While Bobby's crew find themselves in a sci-fi horror movie (think *The Hills Have Eyes* meets *Alien*), the characters in "Cons" see their arrival as a form of salvation – albeit a bloody one.

Danijel Žeželj's shadowy art wonderfully conveys this beaten-up future, while Brian Azzarello and Stephanie Phillips's script offers a visceral mix of action and outrage at the inhumanity of a prison industrial complex which has run rampant.

Will Salmon

Someone's laundromat paid the price for me posting recklessly.
It's crazy that Daredevil isn't here already. I guess he doesn't really go east of the park.
SCANS SHOW. NO. PEOPLE INSIDE.
Iron Man: all wrinkles eliminated, guaranteed!

IRON MAN

Stark truths

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writer **Spencer Ackerman**
Artists **Julius Ohta, Javier Pina**

ISSUES 1-4 **In a world where it's** increasingly difficult to see tech billionaires as good guys, Tony Stark's status as an ultra-rich ex-weapons manufacturer makes him a challenging character to write. Marvel's latest reboot for the character takes an interesting approach to this problem, by enlisting political journalist Spencer Ackerman onto the creative team for a story that – in certain ways – tackles the reality of corporate politics head-on.

This new volume opens with Tony in a bad place and trying to finally recover control of his company Stark International, only to face a takeover from the evil Roxxon Oil that also threatens to exploit his Iron Man technology.

> **"Over-the-top comic-book storytelling tropes"**

The resulting story is strongest when exploring how Tony ends up defeated at every turn by his company board's desire to make as much money as possible. Ackerman's background knowledge gives certain sequences in these opening four issues a believable sense of reality. Unfortunately, outside of these highlights, he also indulges in such goofy satire and over-the-top comic-book storytelling tropes that the series never hangs together as a coherent whole.

Instead, we get a jumble of fight scenes and campy superhero luridness, combined with a frenzied pace that crams what clearly should have been a six-issue arc into only the first three issues. The follow-up issue (featuring a Scarlet Witch cameo) doesn't inspire confidence either.

While Julius Ohta and Javier Pina's artwork brings a gritty energy to the action sequences, sadly this new phase of Tony Stark's life is off to an extremely haphazard start.

Saxon Bullock

i Ackerman worked as a political consultant for the 2009 film *In The Loop*, Armando Iannucci's spin-off from *The Thick Of It*.

GI JOE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Skybound/Image Comics**
Writer **Joshua Williamson**
Artist **Tom Reilly**

ISSUES 1-3 **Skybound's shared** Energon Universe has been one of the more surprising comics success stories of the past couple of years. Having started with sci-fi adventure *Void Rivals* and developed in the rebooted *Transformers*, it now brings in iconic action figure line GI Joe (while several of the characters like Duke, Scarlett and Destro have previously appeared in their own miniseries).

The key to all of this is Energon, the highly coveted extraterrestrial fuel (and Transformers juice) that arms manufacturers MARS Industries and terrorist organisation COBRA intend to exploit on Earth. The Joes are on the case, but their enemies are many steps ahead of them...

Writer Joshua Williamson and artist Tom Reilly deliver a very enjoyable, if largely unsurprising, new take on this material. It looks fabulous, full of dynamic action scenes and with a more fantastical flair than its grittier war comic sibling, *GI Joe: A Real American Hero*. The ties to the rest of the Energon line are well-considered too, adding additional context but never overpowering the main story.

However, while Skybound's *Transformers* has a visceral quality, *GI Joe* – in these opening issues at least – feels like it's playing things a little safe. Still, it's one of 2024's best-selling titles and is sure to run and run.

Will Salmon

INSIDE NO 9: STAGE/FRIGHT

SFX Loves

The Play's The Thing

★★★★★

RUNNING UNTIL **5 APRIL**

Venue **Wyndham's Theatre**

Director **Simon Evans**

Cast **Steve Pemberton, Reece Shearsmith, Miranda Hennessy, Anna Francolini**

STAGE PLAY **Old theatres are, by** their very nature, somewhat haunting, so it's apt that Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith should embrace this for a meta ghost story using their London venue not only as the set but the basis of their latest *Inside No 9* tale. Wyndham's is, apparently, haunted following an accidental death during a production of *The Terror In The Asylum*, the duo inform the audience. File that one away for act two, when the show in question is restaged...

Before that, the audience is treated to some familiar scenes in a series of carefully linked sketches. Due to the ever-present secrecy surrounding the programme, little was known about the stage version in advance, so anyone expecting an entirely new production may be slightly put out to discover that a large segment of it revisits a TV episode.

That said, you'd have to be a right old misery to not enjoy seeing series four's "Bernie Clifton's Dressing Room" recreated live in front of you. But *Stage/Fright* is much more than just "greatest hits" – there are some truly joyous Easter eggs. It feels like you've watched several plays by the end, all of them brilliant and oh so clever.

Aside from being narratively devious and technically joyous – there are special effects that evoke the Pepper's ghost technique, among many others – it's wickedly funny, with digs at modern living, theatre culture, girl bands and influencers, and many jokes about actors and their art. The word play is delicious and the timing razor-sharp in a show that's hilarious, surreal, meta and ridiculous all at the same time.

> **"It feels like you've watched several plays by the end"**

Both Stage and Fright are constant elements, but although some jump scares add to the fun, they don't feel particularly *Inside No 9*.

It's a show that keeps you on the edge of your seat, guessing until you think you've seen it all, and it's cleverly engineered to make you feel exactly that... Did we mention that it was clever?

The show is sold out, though returns do become available so make the effort to grab them when they do. (Or cross your fingers for a national tour.) Now, can we get both this *and* the full series on Blu-ray please?

Darren Scott

Keith Harris's later years were quite difficult.

MARC BRENNER

i Keep your eyes peeled for the hare that's hidden within episodes – it makes more than one appearance.

ETERNAL STRANDS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PS5**

Also on **Xbox Series X|S, PC**

Publisher **Yellow Brick Games**

VIDEOGAME **This thrilling** action game about slaying giant monsters is almost completely ruined by its story: a crap, overly verbose visual novel where bland fantasy archetypes drone at you until you start wishing that it wasn't the monsters you were slaying.

You take control of Brynn, a warrior exploring a generic fantasy land in search of lore, loot, and large beasties to take down. You've got your sword (yawn), your bow (zzz), and also several nasty spells (hooray!). It's great to play a game where the fire and ice you summon can start infernos that spread, or chill you to the bone. The magic here has to be used with real care if you don't want to accidentally burn yourself to a crisp.

Other spells let you summon companions with a bad habit of exploding, or tunnels of kinetic energy that allow you to fling yourself at opponents.

And that becomes very necessary when the Great Foes enter the fray: a series of nine colossal monsters that you have to clamber up and repeatedly stab in the head, freeze in place, and generally do whatever you can to win these tense David and Goliath battles – all while keeping an eye out for counterattacks.

So you won't struggle to track down a good time here, but thanks to the insipid nature of the narrative, you'll have to swallow an awful lot of dull fantasy gruel in order to reach it. **Abbie Stone**

THE TIME TUNNEL: THE NIGHTMARE BEGINS

History in the remaking

★★½☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Running time **150 minutes**
- Format **CD/download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **Anyone who knows** Irwin Allen's original *The Time Tunnel* might spend the first half hour of this Big Finish production wondering if they've been sent the wrong discs. Because this is not a remake, but a sequel, kicking off in a very unfamiliar 2025.

The '60s show followed the adventures of two scientists lost in time after a top-secret US government programme, Project Tic-Toc, went awry. Each week they'd have exciting adventures in different eras, past and future, until the team back at base yanked them to a different period.

This is where Big Finish takes over. It's 2025, and the world experiences a "shudder" that creates an alternate, dystopian reality. Only two hackers and two military researchers on a sub are aware this has taken place, so they team up and head for what they believe is the source: the now abandoned Project Tic-Toc. Could Tony and Doug's time travelling have caused the shudder?

The only way to find out is to boot up the project again and chase them through time. Which in this volume includes fighting Germans alongside air ace Amy Johnson and navigating religious rifts in the English Civil War.

> **"This is not a remake, but a sequel"**

It has so much potential. But the first episode is bogged down by excessive exposition, set-up and technobabble, while the main characters rely on *Buffy*-style quipping and smart-alec sass way past its sell-by date. The on-going bad guys, meanwhile, have an excruciatingly glacial delivery suggesting that the actors haven't a clue what they're talking about. As the story-of-the-week formula settles in, things improve, but the series remains oddly listless and unfocused. **Jonathan Norton**

i Nicholas McArdle (evil scientist Dr Muir) played druidic sect leader De Vries in 1978 *Doctor Who* "The Stones Of Blood".

CALL ME MASTER: INNER DEMONS

Personality Crisis

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **27 FEBRUARY**
- Running time **224 minutes**
- Format **CD/download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **Modern *Who* has** had plenty of fun with different incarnations of the Master, and Sacha Dhawan's "Rasputin"-dancing latest is no exception. Here we delve further into his psyche with three stories in which the master of disguise once again tries on a variety of different roles, this time attempting to work out who he really is when faced with an identity crisis.

First up is "Self-Help", which sees the Master trapped on an icy mountain-top for several hundred years, before being picked up by a group of pilgrims who believe him to be the Great Zenith. As he recovers from centuries of isolation he gradually reasserts his identity as "the chaotic one". It's a surprisingly playful story and Dhawan pulls off long stretches of monologues impressively well.

"The Clockwork Swan" ramps up the playfulness even further as the Master impersonates a detective investigating deaths in the cast of a holo-theatre production – complete with truly terrible French accent. It's a clever storyline that (without giving too much away) leans into the contemporary fears of actors and their possible replacement.

Set-closer "The Good Life" has a more sombre tone, grappling with issues of immigration and hatred of outsiders. Young student Elta looks for truth on a holy island, hoping to find a teacher to help her make sense of the loss of balance in the world. Instead she meets the Master, who really seems to be trying to be good for a while – before realising he's really bad at it. He's genuinely creepy by the end, slowly transforming into the cackling Master from the TV.

There's a fine line to walk in making a bad guy the "hero", but it's a task Big Finish have once again succeeded in, ensuring that the Doctor's closest enemy is always entertaining, while never suppressing the evil within.

Rhian Drinkwater

i "The Good Life" was inspired by Mervyn Peake's *Mr Pye*, in which a man grows wings when he's good/horns when bad.

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

COMPUTERS

Do you know a bit about bytes, even when the chips are down? We hope this quiz doesn't make your brain crash...

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
Which actor provided the voice of the USS Enterprise computer?

QUESTION 2
Who wrote the original novel on which the 1977 film *Demon Seed* was based?

QUESTION 3
Whereabouts is WOTAN, the megalomaniacal computer in the *Doctor Who* story "The War Machines", based?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Name this computer, and the TV series you'd find it in.

QUESTION 5
Which '80s television series featured a hand-held computer called Box?

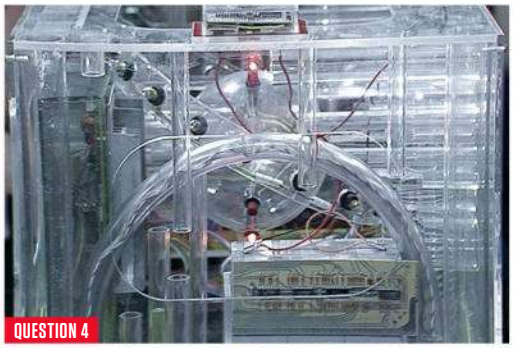
QUESTION 6
Name the computer which Professor Xavier uses to detect and locate other mutants.

QUESTION 7
According to Arthur C Clarke, what does the name of *2001: A Space Odyssey*'s killer computer HAL stand for?

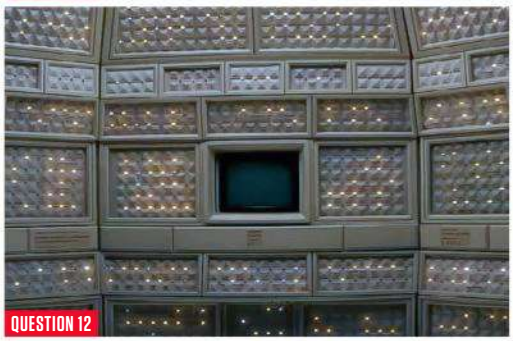
QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Name this computer, and the TV series you'd find it in.

QUESTION 9
In the *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* episode "I, Robot... You, Jane", a demon is accidentally released into cyberspace. How exactly does it happen?

QUESTION 10
Name the regular strip in weekly horror comic *Scream!* which featured a vengeful computer called Max.


QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8


QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11
In *The Prisoner*'s "The General", Number Six short-circuits the titular computer by feeding it a question. What's the question?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Name this computer, and the film it featured in.

QUESTION 13
Who sang the theme tune for the 1984 computer/human love triangle movie *Electric Dreams*?

QUESTION 14
What's the name of the computer which runs the Quantum Leap project?

QUESTION 15
Name both of the actors who played *Red Dwarf*'s shipboard computer Holly.

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Supply the title that's been removed from this movie poster.

QUESTION 17
In the *Star Trek* episode "The Ultimate Computer", how does Kirk get rogue computer M-5 to shut down?

QUESTION 18
Which author wrote the 1909 short story "The Machine Stops"?

QUESTION 19
Name the actor who voiced the computer Deep Thought in the TV version of *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*.

QUESTION 20
Which TV series featured "an extraterrestrial supercomputer in the wall"?

Answers
1 Majel Barrett 2 Dean Koontz 3 The Post Office Tower 4 Orac/*Blake's 7* 5 *Star Cops* 6 Cerebro 7 Heuristically programmed Algorithmic computer 8 IRAC, *Wonder Woman* 9 Willow scans a book 10 "The Thirteenth Floor" 11 "Why?" 12 Mother, *Alien* 13 Phil Oakey 14 Ziggy 15 Norman Lovett, Hattie Hayridge 16 *WarGames* 17 By explaining that it's committed murder 18 EM Forster 19 Valentine Dyall 20 *The Sarah Jane Adventures*

How did you do?

What's your processing power?

0-5
ZX81

6-10
Atari ST

11-15
PowerBook

16-19
El Capitan

20
Google Willow

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"They used the J word!" "Jontent?"

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STAR WARS: ANDOR
THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

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DON'T HAVE THE SHROOMS

DOCTOR WHO
WHO'S THAT GIRL?

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Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Destiny Of The Doctors

Dom Carter, freelance writer

Doctor Who must be frustrating for game developers. Here's a property that has the potential to go anywhere and anywhen, but with a sandbox that big how do you guide the player through an adventure? *Destiny Of The Doctors*' solution: don't open the TARDIS doors.

Made before but not released until after the 1996 *TV Movie*, *Destiny Of The Doctors* sees you play as the Graak – an entity made of floating psychic blobs – whose mission is to solve puzzles in order to release the Doctor's first seven incarnations, which have been imprisoned by the Master.

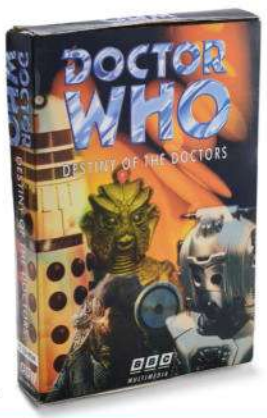
Like a lot of *Doctor Who* media from the Wilderness Years, the game is something of a greatest hits retrospective. Classic villains make an appearance, there's newly recorded audio of Doctors Four through Seven and the Brigadier, and it features more running up and down corridors than you can shake the Graham Williams era at. This might all sound tame to fans fed on a rich diet of the 2005 revival, but in the late–'90s you took what you could get.

The gaming experience was somewhat clunky and tedious even by 1997 standards. Each level saw you yomp through the TARDIS on your way to complete some vaguely outlined task, while trying to remember whether it was the radio or the beehive which kills the Autons. *Tomb Raider* it wasn't. And yet, despite the repetitive challenges, there's lots to admire.

Piloting the TARDIS is a thrill, Daleks and Cybermen seem uniquely scary when they're coming after you instead of a television character, and the database of video clips from old episodes felt like a pre-YouTube treasure trove. Remember, this was back when many stories were still yet to be released on VHS.

The main highlight though is undoubtedly Anthony Ainley, returning to play the Master one last time. The specially shot video sequences where he chews the pixelated scenery are a hilarious blend of camp and menace which have rightfully found a new audience via memes and parody videos.

You have to sift through some dated graphics and slow plotting to get to the good stuff in *Destiny Of The Doctors*, but what could be more classic *Who* than that? ●



Dom wishes you good luck, Graak, you're going to need it.

Fact Attack!

→ When you win, the game ends with the Master being locked up and taken away to be put on trial. A neat lead-in to the *TV Movie*...

→ Writer Gary Russell used this sequence of events as a convenient excuse for Paul McGann's Eighth Doctor not appearing in the game.

→ Want to see the footage of the Master but don't have a computer that runs Windows 95? It's all on the "Survival" DVD as a bonus feature.

→ Prolific *Doctor Who* writer/script editor Terrance Dicks was involved with the script for the Master, giving his dialogue an authentic touch.

→ Superfan Ian Levine expanded the game into a unlicensed serial. He even got Sylvester McCoy to play the Seventh Doctor.

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